

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **Literary Biography and its Critics**

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## Introduction

This thesis analyses Anglo-American criticism of literary biography during the late twentieth century from within and outside the academy<sup>1</sup>. It moves on to discuss the work of three contemporary British biographers in the context of recent debate about the genre: Claire Tomalin, an independent biographer; Hermione Lee, a lifelong academic who writes biography for the general and academic reader; and Richard Holmes who has had a foot in both camps having been both an independent biographer and an academic. All three are understood as more traditional biographers who abide by what Hermione Lee calls “some inevitable conventions” (*Introduction* 123)<sup>2</sup>. These conventions she gets out in the following passage:

Most biography moves forward and onward, sets the main figure in its context, mixes the plot with accounts of the subject’s work, of historical complexities or of subsidiary characters, and uses description and observation, documentary sources, witness testimony, peripheral materials, and first-hand knowledge to construct the story. Biographers may choose to concentrate on a particular part of the life.... They may allow gaps and puzzles into the narrative, or try to smooth these over. They may introduce moral judgements or personal opinions. But they all want to give as full, intelligible, and accurate a version of the subject’s life as possible. And they all want

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<sup>1</sup> According to Justin Kaplan, “Biography as we know it is largely an Anglo-American phenomenon. Other societies draw a stricter line than we do between public and private arenas, between the work and the life. They don’t share our obsession with childhood and adolescence, ‘creativity’ and ‘identity’, the quiriness and singularities of private lives. We assume we have a right to know everything about other people” (1). Biographer Nigel Hamilton, an American who has lived in England, suggests that biography is “a very Anglo-American profession ... First show me your man-then let me listen to what he has to say” is our unspoken injunction” (106).

<sup>2</sup> In an introduction to biography Hermione Lee reflects on a number of themes which arise in criticism about the genre and are explored in this study. She questions the ability of any biography to tell the truth and focuses on narrative: “biography is a form of narrative, not just a presentation of facts” (*Introduction* 5) and “Even a biography that appears to be omitting nothing ... has emerged from a process of choices” (10). She comments on the criticism that all biographers bring their own autobiography into their biographical writing, an important theme in later chapters of this study and suggests that there “must be some involvement, but there must also be detachment” (13). She argues that there “is no such thing as a life lived in isolation” (13) and that biography “always reflects, and provides, a version of social politics” (14) which counters the view of critics, quoted in the next chapter, who argue that biography is merely rooted in individualism and ahistorical analysis. She agrees that biography “requires, or assumes, a way of thinking about identity and selfhood” (14), although she adopts the view that it “is not necessary for a biographer to have a theory or set of general rules about identity” (15), but when they do so they are subject to criticism, as argued in a later chapter.

to make the specific facts and details add up to some overall idea of the subject, so that their biography, for the moment, will give the truest answer to the question: What was she, or he, like? (124)

Tomalin, Lee and Holmes may not seem on the face of it to be biographers who challenge conventions of the genre. They are certainly less radical than biographers who overtly subvert traditional forms, such as Alexander Masters in *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2005), James Shapiro in *1599* (2005), a study of one year during the life and time of William Shakespeare, Frances Wilson in *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth* (2008), or Adam Sisman in *The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge* (2006), focusing on the years when the friendship between these two poets was at its strongest. But the biographies of Tomalin, Holmes and Lee, I shall argue, are not without experimental aspects.

In this study I support Lee's assertion that although there can be no definitive version of a life, or any particular aspect of it, some accounts are more convincing and persuasive than others, both in relation to how the available evidence, including that of historical context, is applied within a biographical narrative and how skilled a narrator the biographer is. I also aim to make the case that contemporary British biography since 1970, literary biography in particular, has not only responded to objections from some academics critics but, in the case of some biographies at least, embraces aspects of recent academic literary theory, New Historicism and Feminism in particular. It is not within the remit of this thesis to provide an overview of literary theory or weigh up its arguments. It is rather my intention to argue that objections to the genre have been influenced by aspects of recent theory, and that critics have not acknowledged the extent to which traditional biographers, Tomalin, Holmes and Lee in particular, are aware of and have responded to these objections in their biographical writing.

An overview of published criticism, discussed in the next chapter, much of it espoused by academics who are themselves biographers, identifies a range of objections to the genre: biography, its critics argue, depicts its subjects as coherent and knowable; it is rooted in history, but biographers nevertheless make poor historians, in their use of fiction and speculative analysis; its narrative conventions are rooted in nineteenth century realism; its concerns are with the ‘great and the good’; and it seeks to identify with its subject. Finally, in the case of recent literary biography, critics argue that biographers have been oblivious to ‘the death of the author’ debate or what has been called the ‘biographical fallacy’, when they seek the life of a writer in his or her work<sup>3</sup>. In this study I want to argue that there is a distinction between this approach and a study of authorship by literary biographers who seek to understand how a writer transforms his or her life experience in their writing. In other words a writer may draw on his or her experience without writing text which directly relates to the specific details of this or that event or relationship; it is in part the role of literary biography to consider how images or scenes from a life are transformed into the creative narrative of a literary biographical subject – to understand how the literary and life narratives intertwine and are in fact intrinsic to each other. When a biographer engages in literary criticism however, one way to interpret the biographical fallacy, they leave themselves open to the fiercest criticism by academic critics, as Chapter Six will discuss. A later chapter will discuss the extent to which biographers are criticized if they undertake literary criticism; I will argue that drawing on a work to inform an understanding of someone’s life is different and leaves biographers less open to criticism.

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<sup>3</sup> In their famous essay rooted in the New Criticism of the 1930s to 1950s, Monroe Beardsley and W.K. Wimsatt argue that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (‘The Intentional Fallacy’ 3). When biographers imply that the narrative in fiction or poetry is directly linked to specific actual events or people from an author’s experience they are accused, drawing on Wimsatt and Beardsley’s title, of the biographical fallacy: a belief that a work of fiction or poetry must directly reflect events and people in the author’s actual experience and making judgments about the writer’s text as a result. Biographer Arnold Rampersad defines the biographical fallacy as “making judgements about a poem or novel based on one’s knowledge of the writer’s life” (3).

Chapters in this thesis address each of these objections and argue that in the case of Tomalin, Holmes and Lee at least they are at times inaccurate and unfair. My thesis argues that Tomalin, Holmes, Lee and some of their late twentieth century peers are fully aware that biographical knowledge is relative and that the lives of their subjects are composite and fragmented; they often subvert the use of realist forms in their biographical writing; and to varying degrees they understand that the form and style of their narrative is as important to their depiction of their subjects as the facts of the lives they are unravelling. Finally, my thesis argues that even when a biographer seems to be seeking to identify with her subject, she becomes a character in her own work, and that we as readers find the character of the narrator – as well as that of her subject – a source of interest and even drama. It is not the voice of the actual biographer we hear, but his or her self-construct, a ghostly presence in conversation with his or her subject. In other words, biography offers a version both of the biographical subject and the biographer. I will discuss this approach particularly in a chapter on the work of Lee. In later chapters I shall also consider the extent to which objections to biography are reflected in the reviews received by Tomalin, Holmes and Lee, and I will discuss recent developments in the academic study of the genre, in particular those associated with the rise of life-writing, autobiography, and what has come to be known as auto/biography as fields of literary study.

Juliette Atkinson, in a recent study of Victorian biography, suggests that studies of the genre have generally belonged to one of four categories: historical or period overviews; "biographers' accounts of their craft" (*Victorian Biography Reconsidered* 6); theoretical questions concerning biography as a genre; and the social role of biography, "the manner in which the genre articulates, or responds to, contemporary concerns" (7). This study is especially concerned with Atkinson's third category.

The late 1960s marked a key moment both in the genre of biography and in academic theory. Taking the genre first, the publication of *Lytton Strachey* by Michael Holroyd in 1967, in which he “exposes” Strachey’s homosexuality, is considered a turning point which highlighted a dramatic move from public to private concerns in biography: according to Anthony Curtis, “It was then that the Age of Reticence was succeeded by the Age of Candor” (“Shilling Lives” 127)<sup>4</sup>. Mark Bostridge has more recently suggested that:

In our own time, modern biography is often said to date from 1967, and the publication of the first volume of Michael Holroyd’s life of Lytton Strachey which broke through the barriers of biographical discretion. (xii)

But Holroyd’s biography reveals a lot more than interest in Strachey’s homosexuality and his overall approach to biography has more significant implications for the recent history of biography, highlighting themes to be explored in this study.

Holroyd believes that the work of a literary biographer does not lie in sensationalism but in attempting to chart illuminating connections between past and present, life and work ... biography is no longer a mere inventory of facts ... We know the value of dreams and fantasies, the shadow of the life that isn’t lived but lingers within people, and that the lies we tell are part of the truth we live. (*Works on Paper* 19)

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<sup>4</sup> The debunking role of biography and its move to deal with personal as well as public aspects of a life has been criticised by biographers and academics, and biographies are seen as sources of salacious and cheap gossip: according to Justin Kaplan, “biographies without voyeuristic, erotic thrills are like ballpark hot-dogs without mustard” (1). Kaplan summarises 1990s criticisms of the genre which argue that “biography is voyeuristic, invasionary, exploitative, a wild goose chase: its methods are obsolete, its premises shaky, its promises of unmediated reporting altogether fraudulent, and its end product just a pile of paper and a collection of gossip” (6). As Holroyd suggests, if you ask a novelist, poet, playwright they will see biographers as “parasites” (*Works on Paper* 6) and biography “as a mere conjuring trick” (7). And biographer John Worthen agrees that “biographical writing is very often indeed a species of confidence trick – in spite of its continual claim to be rooted in documentary evidence” (240).

If we have secret lives, hidden from view, Holroyd argues that “the biographer, like an archaeologist, attempts to bring this hidden life into view. Between the lines of the text lie the invisible lives of the writers.... This is the Theory of Reconstruction. For the life of the writer is part of the text of his work.... By re-examining the past and pointing it in a new direction, it may now be possible to question our understanding of the present, and affect our vision of the future” (30). Although no biography can fit neatly into the constraints of a particular theory, this process might be described as a poetics of reconstruction in biography. My discussion in forthcoming chapters suggests that the principles which may underpin this poetic are the following: that biographers are historians who do more than describe facts; that biographical discourse encompasses the material, outer life as well as the writing life of a writer; that it seeks an understanding of the present in the past; and that it makes imaginative connections between diachronic and synchronic evidence, even when facts may be hidden or deliberately distorted by a biographical subject.

There is a crucial relationship between Holroyd’s approach and postmodern theory which is important here. Holroyd describes it as a conflict:

This theory of what I call ‘reconstruction’ views the rewriting and reinterpretation of past lives for future generations, with all their shifts of emphasis, pattern, tone and cumulate meaning, as analogous to the oral tradition of story-telling. But before the principles of reconstruction can be established, a truce may have to be declared between those theoretical critics and working biographers who see their interests as being opposed. (“How I Fell Into Biography” 101)

I will be looking at the extent to which biographers have tried to reach such a truce in this study and will return to this idea in a chapter on the work of Hermione Lee in particular. In a 2008 newspaper article Holroyd highlights one of the most intractable tensions which have

made reaching such a truce difficult. While commenting on what apparently is “the explosion of ‘life writing’ in universities” (*Guardian Saturday Review* 13), he wishes people did not make such a hard-and-fast distinction between fiction and non-fiction: “I prefer creative and re-creative writing. You can’t make things up, but you have to try and re-create it” (13). As the approach of some biographers discussed in this thesis will illustrate, this is one of the key tensions in responses to literary biography: to what extent does the storytelling ability of the biographer, and his or her rhetorical skills, influence the authenticity of the life they tell. I will argue that some biographers understand history as shaped by stories and recoverable through the construction of narrative, whilst remaining committed to basing biographical narrative on material evidence. But some – and I will argue that Richard Holmes falls into this category – are attacked by academic critics when their understanding of the re-creative approach involves not making a hard-and-fast distinction between fact and fiction.

The period covered by this study encompasses the birth of Theory from the late 1960s to the current ‘life after Theory’ debate. According to Frank Kermode, “1968 was the watershed” (60) for Theory within the academy. Michael Payne and John Schad note that structuralist and poststructuralist theory began “in Paris in the late 1960s”, then “peaked in Yale in the 1970s and 1980s” and “has been busy declining in a university near you in the second half of the nineties” (ix). Perhaps, but the feminist Toril Moi suggests that in the early twenty-first century “the 1980s sense of ‘theory’ still reigns supreme ... It still produces the paradigm for most postgraduate education in literature” (166). In a recent study, however, Kevin Sharpe and Steven Zwicker argue that biography:

has been the genre least infected by the theoretical preoccupations and critical innovations of the last two or three decades.... While it is clear that criticism and biography have both flourished, they have not much engaged in conversation, the



methods and approaches of criticism and theory scarcely informing the premises or arts of biography. (v)

The supposedly non-theoretical approach of the literary biographer is implicit in Stefan Collini's ironic summary of the genre's conventional features. For Collini biography must:

be 'readable', must stick closely to a detailed chronological narrative, must imaginatively give access to the interiority of the subject's life, must have as much detail as possible about 'relationships' and the subject's sexual life, must recount details of 'everyday' life, must draw heavily on letters and diaries, must mine the subject's published work for biographical material, must largely eschew overt engagement with the work of historians and other scholars of the period in question, must be long, and so on.... (284)

This study will show that whilst literary biographers may seek to reach out to a popular audience and be 'readable', such generalizations about their use of both a chronological realist narrative, which seeks to portray a writer's interior life, and autobiographical material such as letters and diaries, wrongly imply that they are unaware that they are only creating one version of a life constructed by the biographer rather than some single definitive version. Also I will challenge the objection, discussed in the next chapter, that all biographers simplistically seek to make connections between life and work, without an understanding of the wider social and political context in which the biographical subject lived. I would argue that Claire Tomalin, Richard Holmes and Hermione Lee, for instance, to varying degrees, raise questions in their biographical writing about the nature of the self, the relationship between what we can really know about the lives of writers and what this can tell us about who they were as people, and about the period in which they lived and wrote.

Richard Bradford is more positive about the shared interests between academics and literary biographers, many of whom are, of course, academics themselves, though he is well aware that his has been a minority position. He has recently noted that:

In literary studies the so-called New Critics ordained that the text rather than the writer should be the primary, some argued the exclusive, subject of scrutiny.... The theoretical successors to this generation the Structuralists and PostStructuralists, were even less tolerant of the presence of the author, with Barthes famously announcing his extinction by the united forces of the arbitrary sign system and the text. (xii)

For Bradford, however, “there is no clear line of demarcation” (xii) between literary biography and “those whose approach to the concept of identity and the recording of existence involves questions customarily associated with theory and philosophy” (xii). I would go further and suggest that although some recent biographers have responded to the concerns of the academy by not accepting the erasure of authorship, they have accepted, although to varying degrees, other aspects of academic debate, including theory’s stress on the complex nature of reader response, the difficult or impossibility of recovering authorial intention, and the problematic relationship between fact and fiction, on the one hand, and biographical subject and biographical narrator, on the other. However, when literary biographers focus on the work as well as the life of a biographical subject, straying into literary criticism by using evidence from someone’s life to inform an understanding of a text, they continue to leave themselves open to academic censure.

## Chapter 1

### The Case Against: Theory and Biography

This chapter will identify major objections to biography influenced by academic theory, drawing on both British and American sources. Kathryn Hughes suggests that a recent study of the genre, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (2009) by Michael Benton, “is able to demonstrate resoundingly that, far from being a transparent transcription of a particular life, biographical writing is always deeply rooted in the intellectual concerns of its moment of production” (*Biography* 552) and for late twentieth century literary biography this moment includes the influence of academic theory.

An overview of published criticism, much of it espoused by academics who are themselves biographers, identifies a range of objections to the genre: biography seeks to present universal truths about coherent, knowable biographical subjects; biography is meant to be a non-fiction genre rooted in history, but biographers nevertheless make poor historians, in their use of fiction and sloppy speculative analysis, and in their misuse of autobiographical evidence; biography is rooted in nineteenth century realism; it is individualistic, focusing primarily on the ‘great and the good’; and it privileges the male voice of the biographer, seeking to identify with his subject. Finally, in the case of literary biography, critics argue that biographers do not acknowledge ‘the death of the author’ debate nor the ‘biographical fallacy’, when they seek the life of a writer in his or her work. Forthcoming chapters will consider these objections in turn and will argue that biographers, in particular the British biographers Claire Tomalin, Richard Holmes and Hermione Lee, have responded to them in their biographical writing. They may not agree with them, but they can be shown, very clearly, not to have ignored them.

## **Biography, Truth and the Stable Self**

To academic critics such as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield what is wrong with literary realism, and by extension biography, is that it seeks to present “the universal truths of great literature ... embodied in coherent and consistent ‘characters’” (182). For these critics the biographer seeks to reassure us that truth can be found in coherent and rounded portrayals. Feminist academic Liz Stanley argues that the biographer constructs his subject in the context of normative cultural expectations and conventions and rejects contingency and the fragmented nature of identity: “Life presents us with complex views of ‘the self’: with competing estimations of character, motive, behaviour, intention. Biography should recognise this, document and present these versions concerning its subjects rather than trying to eradicate them through searching for a seamless ‘truth’ about subjects and/or events in their lives” (11). Sven Birkets agrees that “biographical narration itself is premised on coherence and meaning. The biographer almost occupationally views his subject as living under the aspect of a singular destiny, with everything around him contributing to press his experience into its intended shape” (94). He believes that the reading public for biography requires this coherence because we have a “steadily depreciating sense of subjective coherence ... [and] we turn to biography as compensation, to gather in vicariously what we are losing in the private sphere” (91). Similarly, Mary Evans argues that “auto/biographies” (meaning biographies and autobiographies)

cannot represent what they claim to represent, namely the ‘whole’ life of a person. Furthermore this ‘whole’ person is in any case a fiction, a belief created by the very form of auto/biography itself ... it may be useful to think of it ... as a mythical construct of our society and our social needs. Central to those social needs is the compelling wish of many people to experience life as an organised and coherent process, in which rational choices are made. (1)

She promotes the view that “what auto/biography does is to offer us a chance to stabilise the uncertainties of existence” (131), reassuring readers that order and stability can be found in all our lives. Joe Law and Linda Hughes sum up this perspective when they suggest that the notion of the

unified self not only survives but positively thrives in contemporary biography, along with confidence in the ability of that self to act and to achieve. Postmodern doubts about agency and autonomy have had little impact on the practice of biography, particularly popular biography. (2)

These critics reject any search for a knowable, coherent and stable truth about the self, and the extent to which some late twentieth century biographers agree, contrary to the view of these critics, is an important theme in this study.

## **Biography and History**

A related objection to the genre concerns biography’s complex relationship with history. An influential approach in recent historiography is represented by the work of Hayden White. White embraces the postmodern agenda and argues for the closeness of history to fiction, both of which should be “viewed simply as verbal artefacts” (122). For historians and novelists, “the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same” (121). Historians are concerned with observable events that have a specific time-space location, whilst creative writers are concerned with imagined, hypothetical, invented events. For White the “nature of the kinds of events with which historians and imaginative writers are concerned is not the issue” (121), rather the issue is their ordering of events into narrative. In *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), White proposes that history and fiction both seek coherence through narrative:

How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian's subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary that is to say fiction – making operation. (85)

For White historical narratives endow events with meaning by “exploiting the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions” (91).

In a useful article which sums up key aspects of White's position, Ina Schabert suggests that purportedly factual biography—that is, biography that presents itself as factual—uses “the narrative patterns of yesterday's novel, of late nineteenth century ‘realism’” (9). She is critical of what she sees as a resulting “hybrid biography” which is “composed simultaneously on historiographical and fictional principles” (10) and she argues that such biographers often suggest “an inner life for their characters mainly by a selective and figurative use of evidence” (12). Schabert is critical of these hybrid texts in which “fictional elements destroy the reliability of the text as a source of factual information whereas the factual narrative interferes with the imaginative vision” (13).

Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1999) is an example of a hybrid biography, introducing, in Michael Benton's phrase, “creative interludes into life-writing” (“The Cinderella of Literary Studies” 48). *Dickens* has two complete texts running in parallel. One is a more traditional biography of Dickens, the other is fictional and has seven chapters interweaving with the main biography. The two texts can be understood as conducting a conversation about the nature of biography. In the opening fictional chapter Dickens enters one of his own novels and becomes lost: “it was as if he were floating, floating in a dark place, waiting once more to be born” (112). In the next fictional installment, ‘I’, the narrator, meets Dickens, who goes on in the third chapter to meet other writers from past and future times. In the fifth fictional

chapter, the fictional biographer, in conversation with a fictional Dickens, wonders if “the author is not so important, so central, as we tend to believe? That he is in some sense not responsible for his creations?” (793) and the fictional Dickens declares that “Biographers are simply novelists without imagination” (794). This series of chapters is a text within the biography which interrogates not only biography, but writing itself, in which the subject as author, the biographer as another author within the text, the external, material biographer, and the reader all have a part to play.

Towards the end of *Dickens*, in his more omniscient voice as narrator, Ackroyd addresses the complaint about biography’s tendency to undervalue historical context:

surely it is in the “trifles” of Dickens’s life that we have found the source and measure of the works which comprise his greatness. Not trifles, then, but origins.... To see Dickens day by day, making his way, the incidents of his life shaping his fiction just as his fiction alters his life, the same patterns of emotion and imagery rising up from letters and novels and conversations, the same momentum and the same desire for control – to see Dickens thus is to turn biography into an agent of true knowledge, even as we remember that the greatness of his fiction may lie in its absolute *difference* from anything which the life may show us. But once we have made that leap, from the man to his works, then we can also begin to carve out that unimaginable passage from the single human being to the age in which he lived. (1143)

Biographers have been newly attentive to the political period in which their subject lived, not only to acknowledge the importance of historical context to biographical analysis but also to understand the biographical subject’s work in the context of his or her life, even if there are no simplistic connections between them, and to appreciate the influence of others, in particular other writers, on any author’s work.

John Keener suggests an approach which understands biography as a discourse which can range across and between the fact/fiction poles. This continuum ranges from biographical fiction to autobiography and biography as forms of history. Keener suggests that “rather than aligning fiction against history, we might begin by aligning fiction with biography as the two narrative poles that most directly invite us to ‘read about people and judge them as such’. Neither pole can be rigidly defined ... fiction is no more intrinsically imaginative than biography is verifiable – and so I will treat fiction and biography as discursive practices rather than as definitive generic forms” (7). It is interesting to think about this more nuanced approach but one distinction between Keener’s work and this study is that he focuses on generic distinctions between biographical fiction, autobiography and biography, rather than on an underlying question about the nature of narrative in nonfiction, biography in particular in the case of my thesis. A study of the narrative in each biography by Tomalin, Lee and Holmes is the focus of my research and informs my argument about the extent to which their writing responds to the concerns of recent academic theory and the criticisms of some academics.

The critic Arend Flick welcomes postmodern trends in biography, as does Keener, but seeks a middle path which seems to recognize more overtly Schabert’s concerns. To begin with, he proposes that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction has broken down in academic literary study, as discourse per se is fictive:

In university today, all human constructs tend increasingly to be seen as texts ... the tendency of nearly all theories of literature has been to collapse all generic distinctions under the category of sign systems. And nearly anything we produce as humans, in this view, begins to look like a text, a fiction, a mirage. (93)



As a consequence, he argues, “Many theorists of biography today ... seem convinced that no meaningful generic distinction can be made between the fictional and factual, between novels and biographies” (94). Flick acknowledges that the “quest for absolute truth is chimerical”, yet, in a manner that brings him closer to Schabert’s concerns; he insists that it “does not follow from that acknowledgement that all assertions we make about reality are arbitrary, equally fictional. Some statements about the past are truer than others, or at least have a much higher probability of truth” (94). He recognises that biographers speculate, they “have imposed an order upon the lives they record that differs always in some measure from the disorder of any life actually lived. But ... when they invent, when they cease to test their assertions about their subjects against verifiable evidence ... they become bad biographers, not great novelists” (94). He acknowledges that all biography “admittedly, involves selection of incident and the imposition of narrative form in flux. All hypotheses about reality are provisional. But biographies are not novels” (109). Flick argues that modern biography may be narrative, and subject to the distinct conventions of narrative, but that it should nevertheless be based on facts, rejecting creative inventions. Similarly, Michael Benton has suggested:

To describe biography simply as history cross-bred with narrative glosses over the obvious fact that neither term defines an insulated, autonomous concept. History is conveyed through narrative – indeed, some would argue that the past is irrecoverable and that history is essentially fictional ... conversely, fictional narrative is dependent upon history, if not directly then indirectly through its need to create a consistent, believable and recognizable ‘secondary world’. This interpenetration of history and narrative destabilises biography in two particular areas: in the plausibility of its deployment of historical data within the time frame of the subject’s life; and in its

uncertainty once it shifts from recording the exterior life of actions and events to the inner life of the subject's mind and feelings. (43)

Graham McCann also sums up a perspective which is prevalent in criticism about the genre and which will be unraveled throughout this study:

A biographer, bounded by fact, still invents her form and, through language directs the reader's impressions, images, and interpretation of the subject. How she achieves this could become the focus of a theoretical approach initiated by the recognition of figurative language and its function in biography. Furthermore, discourse in a biography is narrative and in that role assumes properties other than that of recording events. No biographer merely records a life; every biographer, no matter how objective she declares herself, interprets a life. How the biographer expresses the life becomes, to some extent, the real subject of the biography. (327)

I understand McCann's perspective to mean not that the biographer and his or her version of a life is more important than the story of his or her biographical subject. But rather that the study of biography should focus on the nature of narrative in the genre and that the facts never just speak for themselves. For McCann "The finest biographies re-invent rather than reconstruct ... Biography is fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language - a goal similar to that of fiction" (329). In later chapters, I will argue that though biographers may apply narrative or rhetorical conventions and practices they are less open to criticism if they do so in a way that makes a clear distinction between inventing things and writing rhetorically using known facts.

## Speculation and Questions of Evidence

These objections to biography raise questions about the use of speculation by biographers. Marjorie Garber suggests biographers may be inclined to speculate about events or the experience of their subjects: “instead of revealing the ‘truth’ behind the gauze, the newly liberated biographer, freed from the convention of reticence, replaces concealment with augmentation – good guesses, connecting the dots, speculative fictions” (21). Stanley Fish claims to feel “queasy” whenever he starts to read a biography, anticipating a “spiral sprawl of unconvincing speculation” (*New York Times* 19) as the biographer struggles to interpret the life of his or her subject: “meaning is supposed to just well up spontaneously from the details biographers obsessively collect ... the biographer is compelled to invent or fabricate a meaning by riding his or her favourite hobbyhorse until every inch of the subject’s life is covered by some reassuring pattern of cause and effect” (19). Fish is wary of biographical interpretation and believes that in biography “the only truth being told is the truth of contingency ... and contingency is what no self-respecting biographer can allow to stand; it must be pushed away and replaced with an explanatory structure” (19). This study will discuss how some biographies address the closely allied charges of speculation and the temptation to invent. I would argue that the difference between them is that speculation involves making it clear when facts are not known but making suggestions about what may or may not have happened in someone’s life, whereas invention means presenting evidence as fact when it is merely a construction created by the biographer.

Biographers are also harshly criticized when they use autobiographical evidence - the subject’s letters, journals, memoirs and so forth - to inform speculation about a life. Janet Malcolm goes so far as to liken the biographer to “a professional burglar.... The voyeurism and busybodyism that impel writers and readers of biography alike are obscured by an apparatus of scholarship designed to give the enterprise an appearance of banklike blandness

and solidity ... backstairs gossip and reading other people's mail" (9). Malcolm calls the whole practice of biography into question here and her approach to the use of letters as evidence is one aspect of her disapproval of biography: "Letters are the great fixative of experience ... They are the fossils of feeling ... they are biography's only conduit to unmediated experience ... only when he reads a subject's letters does the biographer feel he has come fully into his presence ... [which] allows the reader to be a voyeur with him" (110). The way that biographers use autobiographical material as evidence will be a theme explored in a chapter on the work of Claire Tomalin.

### **Biography as Realist Narrative**

Critics argue that the genre of biography remains rooted in nineteenth century realism. Liz Stanley warns that modern biography "is founded upon a realist fallacy" of a coherent and unitary self based on a "correspondence theory of the relationship between the written product of biographical research and the lives it investigates" (8). Narratives are viewed as diachronic, seeking to portray characters who are born, live a successful life, find resolutions to life's challenges, and have an heroic or tragic death. She suggests that "What drives the 'purity of characterisation' approach, from Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1919) to the latest professional biographical publication, is the motor of biographical realism" (11). Joe Law and Linda Hughes consider other similarities between Victorian or realist novels and twentieth century biography: their length, the way both are often "bulked up" (4), overloaded with excessive documentary evidence and facts; their interest in promoting exemplary lives which they see as a trend in feminist and postcolonial biography. Late-twentieth-century biography may also emulate Victorian biography by seeking to rewrite lives for present day purposes: "at times it may seem that modern biographies do not so much demythologize lives as they remythologize them for our own needs" (13). They argue that biographies of Byron

inspired the growth of celebrity biography and that the 'PR bio' including shots of the home, family members and work were also a Victorian invention. Yet as Graham McCann suggests, "Increasingly, the traditional and current practice of biographers - the chronological and comprehensive life - is incommensurate with what we know about the complexity of individual lives. Today, new demands are placed on biography from psychology, anthropology, sociology and history; as a literary enterprise, biography must respond by registering in its form and content new means of expressing human experience" (328). This critique of biography is a response based on postmodern objections to literary realism. What is being objected to is the idea that when we tell stories about people and everyday life it is possible to start at the beginning and understand lives as travelling in a chronological direction as people move from youth into later life, in the process finding success or otherwise in different aspects or moments of his or her life. For many people the pattern of life is complex and fragmented and for the critics of biography the eulogy inherent in much biographical writing tends to smooth over these complexities, seeking resolution and closure to explain away a life in neat causal terms.

### **The Biographical Subject**

A common objection to biography is the alleged individualistic nature of the genre, and its devaluing of collective experience. According to Jorgan Schlaeger, "As a craft as well as a topic for analysis biography demands a radically hermeneutical and person-centred approach. Everything in biography and about biography is interpretation of individuals" (58). Yet as Terry Eagleton argues, for a biography to stand out it must place the subject within his or her historical and cultural context and thereby "evoke not just a single life but the climate of a whole age" ("Buried in the Life" 89). Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield are critical of the liberal humanism behind biography's focus on a single, often male subject,

the belief that “the universal” is “seen as manifested through individual essences which in turn presupposes universals” (182). They argue that an alternative approach is “to understand history and the human subject in terms of social and political process” (182) and to challenge the discourses of power inherent within single subject studies. Schlaeger, in the context of this approach, sees biography as a vehicle for those in power and control:

Compared with the image of our culture which post-modernism projects, biography is, in spite of its intertextual construction, fundamentally reactionary, conservative, perpetually accommodating new models of man, new theories of the inner self, into a personality-oriented cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential. (63)

As Stanley explains: “the biographer is a socially-located person, one who is sexed, raced, classed, aged.... And once we accept that ideas are not unique but socially produced ... then we can also extrapolate this to the ideas and interpretations produced by the biographer; any biographer’s view is a socially located and necessarily partial one” (7). Mary Evans’s critique of biography shares Schlaeger’s concern about a focus on individuals, in particular the great and the good: “we have to ask if auto/biography, a form which in many ways remains rooted in heroic narrative, does not further demonstrate its cultural lag.... The ‘sacred’ auto/biography has been that which has accepted the definition of the subject as ‘great’ within a recognisable set of standards” (142). She goes on:

[We] cannot tolerate the ambiguity of human existence, and we thus provide ourselves with icons of experience and reality ... we assume that all experience is individual rather than collective ... Since we cannot accept this collective experience, we are forced to construct ever more complex individuals to reassure ourselves of our

individuality ... auto/biography helps us to turn our backs on the shared circumstances of social life. (143)

In the context of this critique it is important to acknowledge the huge impact that feminism has had on responses to biography. Feminists in the late twentieth century challenged what they saw as a male dominated genre and envisaged the potential for biography, in partnership with autobiography, to provide a voice for 'minority' subjects<sup>5</sup>, including women, in their roles as subject and biographer. In Evans's view - the view of many feminist theorists - biography may merely promote accounts of dominant, usually male, figures, whose representation seeks to reinforce dominant cultural and political values and ways of behaviour. Biographers, she argues, "depend heavily on mythologised accounts of individual lives for the transmission of oral and cultural values" (3). However, Evans highlights a major change in biography in the late twentieth century:

The reclamation of the past by those outside the circle of the great and the good has been one of the more striking features of the cultural history of the twentieth century ... the reinterpretation of history, the recognition of marginal, disenfranchised and powerless groups can serve to empower in the present.... In this context, a new auto/biography has emerged in which the unnamed and the unknown become the central characters or works of recovery (9-10).

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<sup>5</sup> In 1999 Backscheider proposed that feminism had made four concrete differences to biography: there have increasingly been more biographies published about the lives of women; biography now considers 'ordinary' aspects of people's lives as important; biography now recognizes the use of different types of evidence, such as photographs, which can "highlight themes that might be overlooked" (155); and biography is encouraging the recognition of the importance of networks and relationships as a key to understanding subject's lives. And Catherine Parke distinguishes between majority and minority biographies, identifying several characteristics which distinguishes the difference between them: "(1) the subject being or not being a member of the dominant culture (for our purposes this mean Anglo-American); (2) the author being or not being a member of the dominant culture; (3) the subject being or not being a conventional candidate for biography i.e., one whose importance and interest go without saying; (4) construction of the subject's identity [is] different from major biography, often with greater emphasis on group contexts in which the subject lived and worked; and (5) [in minority biography there is] implicit or explicit cross-examination of the manner, methods, and assumptions of majority biography" (xvii).

Evans believes that a case can be made that “auto/biography becomes the literary articulation of difference” (141)<sup>6</sup>, in other words, a genre through which minority voices can be heard<sup>7</sup>. Whilst rejecting biographies which reinforce stereotypes, she sees biography offering a new vehicle for discourses of feminism, postcolonialism and class. This approach to biography is rooted in the concerns of New Historicism and it “helps raise questions about ... originality in art and about the status of ‘genius’ as an explanatory term, along with the status of the distinction between the ‘major’ and ‘minor’” (4)<sup>8</sup>. Feminism has led to the development of ‘minority’ biography, providing a voice for feminist discourses and the extent to which it has influenced the work of some recent biographers will be discussed in forthcoming chapters.

Biography’s focus on individual genius has also been questioned by the critic and editor Jack Stillinger who discusses ideas about the collaborative nature of authorship which can inform our understanding of biography. Stillinger emphasises the role of friends, partners, publishers and other professional contacts in influencing the work of any single author. He suggests that “for many works, when the circumstances of composition are investigated in detail, the identifiable authorship turns out to be a plurality of authors” (22). Stillinger describes multiple authorship as “the joint, or composite, or collaborative production of literary works that we usually think of as written by a single author” (v) and is distrustful of accounts which focus exclusively on nominal authors.

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<sup>6</sup> This relates to Jacques Derrida’s argument that “words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70).

<sup>7</sup> One of the major shifts in biography achieved by feminist approaches was a move away from a focus on public lives and a turn to the domestic and private in women’s lives, and the lives of those around them. Joan Hedrick sees this approach as creating “a narrative that was neither the male plot of ambition nor the female plot of waiting at home.... Some of the topics I explored would rarely appear in the biography of a man” (164). This refocusing came to be thought of in the 1990s as a revisioning of individual’s lives and of history; this concept and the view of other feminist critics of biography are discussed in a later chapter. Another element of this debate, linked to the exploration of women’s private lives, was an interest in what Victoria Glendinning called the “lies and silences business” (*Lies and Silences* 49) as the lives of women are hidden from view and constrained by social conventions.

<sup>8</sup> For biography this means a distinction between the ‘majority’ studies of figures who represent dominant positions within cultures, in particular male figures amongst the ‘great and the good’ and in positions of political, economic and social power, and ‘minority’ figures, including women.



Finally, postcolonial biography has also sought to challenge traditional biography, whilst acknowledging the representative role of individual lives. South African critic N.C. Manganyi is concerned with the influence of biography in the 1980s. He believes that it offers a way to talk and write about oppression and discrimination: “in politically extreme situations ... the value of biographical studies has to be something more than cultural play, myth creation and literary adventure. Biography in particular must uncover for us the meaning of Africanhood as an immutable reality in the specific and special circumstances of the historical saga of the sub continent” (60). For Manganyi biography is not just telling, it is “primarily a kind of witnessing. It is this very quality of the biographical enterprise which elevates the issue of truthfulness, realness and authenticity to a position of theoretical importance” (48). Though biography “must concern itself with the individual and the historical moment” (60), debate about its contribution to postcolonial studies is evolving in the early twenty first century and is informed by the discourse of postmodernism. In a study of the lives of Arab women in the Middle East, Nadjé Al-Ali argues that a “heightened awareness of the need to avoid generalizations about the “Arab world” has led to a growing body of work focusing on personal accounts and voices, narratives and biographies” (155). Although she recognises the danger of seeking representative voices in biography: “The dialectic between individual experiences and historical context has become an ongoing, unresolved concern for many scholars, and in fact, constitutes one of the most frequently written about problematics in the social sciences. Variations on the theme include the social construction of reality, processes of structuralism, and the relationship between sociology and history to issues of individual and collective consciousness” (156):

Life stories ... are narrated by people whose individual knowledge and experiences of self always take place in relation to others and are shaped by general circumstances ..

This interrelatedness creates the context, or web of meaning, within which we live and act. (157)

In the context of this analysis biography places individual lives within wider discourses of social and political change.

### Issues of Identification

For Stanley Fish “Biographers ... can only be inauthentic, can only get it wrong, can only lie, can only substitute their own story for the story of their announced subject. (Biographers are all autobiographers, although the pretensions of their enterprise won’t allow them to admit it or even see it)” (*New York Times* 19). Fish’s concern that a biographer promotes his own voice highlights a common objection to biography, namely that biographers identify too closely with their subjects<sup>9</sup> and write about themselves as much as their subjects. In other words, that biographers choose biographical subjects who are: iconic heroes in his or her eyes; who share similar interest; are of the same gender, class, race, culture or profession; or whose lives provide an opportunity for the biographer to explore questions about his or her own life and time. Though himself a biographer, John Haffenden wonders whether “perhaps it is true, after all, what they say about biographers: that the books

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<sup>9</sup> A British collection of essays in the 1980s was concerned to explore the issue of identification. Victoria Glendinning in this period noted that, “It is probably true that compulsive biographers immerse themselves in other people’s lives as a way of obliquely investigating their own, but this is the biographer’s own business.... Yet [as a biographer] you do get uniquely close to a person... you do have to struggle to preserve detachment (if that is your aim) and neither to punish nor be excessively partisan” (54). However, Glendinning notes that some biographers do need to believe in heroes and need to be aware of what she calls ‘author theology’ when the subjects become gods or ancestors we worship. Holroyd argues that he has not chosen subjects who resemble him because he specifically wanted to enter the lives of others: “I set out to escape into my subjects lives rather than identify myself with them.... I explore the lives and characters of my biographees as a traveller explores foreign countries... A good biographical subject, it seems to me, is simply one that stirs much feeling and provokes much thought and may therefore call the best writing out of the biographer for the reader.... As he pursues his research and finds out more about his subject, the biographer makes discoveries about himself” (97). Martin Stannard looks at the issue from both sides: “An intimacy between subject and writer is implied which can be construed positively or negatively. A positive construction might argue that this empathy is a precondition of all good literary biography; a negative, that such reciprocation is wholly imaginary, self-seeking, a kind of aesthetic masturbation” (33). Carpenter agrees that as biographers “we’re all really writing about ourselves. That’s the hidden agenda” (273). The notion of biographical ventriloquism seems to arise out of this debate about identification: according to Catherine Peters “the biographer seeks to annihilate the distance between self and his subject by taking on the subject’s own voice” (45). Issues of identification are discussed further in the next chapter.

they write are really about themselves, or that when writing about others they just can't help portraying themselves. We would do best to be critics as well as narrators; to unfold, above all, the works of our subjects" (*Times Literary Supplement* 16). Writing before she became a biographer, Germaine Greer is not only harsh but scathing about authorial intrusion in biography; she believes that in Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson what lives "is not Johnson, but Boswell's intestinal flora" (*The Times* 8). Other critics have described identification in biography in psychoanalytic terms, as counter transference.

Eva Schepeler summarises the distinction between transference which is focused on the patient's approach to the analyst, and counter-transference which is used to describe the analyst's response to the patient and the relationship of the analyst to the patient. In these relationships biographers may seek to resolve their own life issues at the expense of an objective analysis of their subjects' lives. David Hoddeson suggests that it "is far easier to admit to transference effects in biography in the context of theories (frequently feminist) of autobiography and biography that blur the distinctions between these two genres, see a fragmented self as socially constructed in its mirrorings, and disdain the linearity of memory" (327). But counter-transference is not only an issue for feminist biography; it is viewed as a potential concern for all biographers. For example, Stuart Feder, a psychiatrist, sees Samuel Johnson's biography of his friend Richard Savage as an example of counter-transference. Johnson "made the story his own because on some level he believed it to be his own" (*American Imago* 42). Hoddeson believes that "as in psychoanalysis, transferences often become both the chief impediment to, and the chief instrument available for, the construal of a coherent life text" (324). Perhaps the key question then becomes how to avoid conflation between subject and biographer and to balance these voices in each biography.

## **Lives, Works, and Authorial Intention**

Finally a major objection to literary biography is that it draws too much evidence from a subject's writing to understand his or her life, and as a result falls victim to the biographical fallacy or, less problematically, vice versa. P.N. Furbank draws attention to both sides of this issue. On the one hand he argues against "the (to my mind) fatal theory that knowledge of the life will help one to respond to the works" (*Times Literary Supplement* (1998) 9). On the other hand, in another article, he suggests that: "it would seem a flagrant transgression to furnish out the biography of a novelist from his or her novels" (*Times Literary Supplement* (1999) 9). He argues that biography cannot explain "by biographical causes, how a given work of art came to take the shape it did; and I am with Wittgenstein in thinking that causal explanations have no rightful place in aesthetics ... such explanations can only ever be pure guesswork. They might be better left to the reader" (*Times Literary Supplement* (1998) 9). For Furbank the focus for the biographer should be on what the writer has written, because "we have their novels or essays or poems, and, in this respect at least, the truth about what they did is beyond question" (*Times Literary Supplement* (1999) 14). He also believes that biography is a craft which should focus on facts, described in a linear chronology, based on available evidence, and laid out for the attention of a reader who can make his or her own assessment about the implications of different events and experiences within the life of a biographical subject. Any interpretation from the life can "distract us from the works themselves" (*Times Literary Supplement* (1999) 14). Furbank believes that a biographer, like a historian, must not invent his or her evidence nor apply theories of causation and embroider their story: "History is not 'narrative' ... Biography can have a truth, and fiction can have a "truth", but the area between them is a no-man's land into which ... one has no right to stray" ("The Craftlike Nature of Biography" 19-25). I would suggest that Furbank's approach to biography resonates with the "death of the author", the privileging

of the reader, and the New Critic's concern with the "intentional fallacy". Taking each theoretical approach in turn I want to look at how academic theory may have informed Furbank's objections to biography.

Furbank's approach may be influenced by theories summed up by the iconic phrase, the 'death of the author'. For Roland Barthes, as mentioned in the Introduction, in the late 1960's: "the text ... is a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" ("The Death of the Author" 146). Barthes was critical of the fact that the "author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines ... The explanation of work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it" (143). But for Barthes, "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" ("Death of the Author" 148):

the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted ... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the Death of the Author (148).

The privileging of the reader, at the expense of the author, led to the development of Reader Response Theory in the early 1970s. For example, Wolfgang Iser developed the notion of an 'implied reader' who is always present when we consider to whom a text is addressed; in some texts it is clear that the story is being told to a specific person, character, or to a representative group of people such as contemporaries of the narrator. Iser is concerned with "the means of communication by which the reader is brought into contact with the reality represented by the author" (57) and he believes that "text should be understood as a combination of forms and signs designed to guide the imagination of the reader" (58). In the next decade, Malcolm Bradbury summarised the mid-1980s perspective within the academy:

“literary study is not greatly to do with writers but with writing, not with authors but with texts, not with factual records but with conceptual theory.... And so, it sometimes seems, we live in two ages at once. One is the age of the Literary Life, a time when the record of the lives, quirks and oddities of writers seems to constitute one of our great areas of preoccupation and our most interesting forms of narrative.... And yet at the same time we also live in another age, not the age of the celebration of the literary personality, but the age of the Death of the Author” (132-133); for some academic critics of the genre, “a strong suspicion of biography seems to prevail” (136), which Bradbury attributes to the influence of critical theory.

Victoria Olsen, a feminist critic, argues that the story and the subject should speak for themselves as much as possible in a biography, leaving interpretation up to the reader. In effect, she shares Furbank’s sense that life and work should be considered as separate or different, or remain so in biography. She believes that the “best” biographies “lay out their narratives so invisibly that the reader is hardly aware of any particular argument being offered, or any particular focus being singled out” (78). In other words, the biographer should be almost invisible. But in my analysis of biography in this study I will want to argue that it is more helpful to approach questions about the voice of a biographer by accepting that biographers create a version of the relation of their subjects’ lives and works which the reader can accept or reject. In other words, biography may offer a reader a number of ways of reading a biographical subject, or the work of the biographical subject, including a biographical interpretation of the work, offering a preferred perspective perhaps but not necessarily suggesting that there is only one way to understand a life. The biographers studied in my research, to varying degrees, approach their biographical writing in this way. A reader may not agree with how a biography balances the voice of the subject and the narrator,

but I would argue that no biographical narrative, or perhaps no narrative per se, can be so neutral as to have no point of view.

The New Critics, who were influential from the 1930s to the 1950s, privileged the text over the author. In particular, Monroe Beardsley and W.K. Wimsatt in their famous essay “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) argue that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (3). For Jonathan Culler the approach of the New Critics “retains considerable critical importance today” (225). In a response to New Criticism, Stanley Fish, a leading proponent of Reader Response Theory, argued fiercely against a separation between biography and intention “not because it is inadvisable but because it is impossible” (“Biography and Intention” 10), because texts are bound up with intentions, which are bound up with meaning and biography. As far as Fish is concerned there has to be a speaker in a text, who is “an intentional being with a particular, as opposed to a universal history. It follows, then, that neither can you read independently of biography” (12).

Despite this bounded approach, which privileges the text over authorial intention, it is worth noting that Wimsatt and Beardsley, mentioned in the Introduction, were interested in the influence of biographical understanding and the private, internal perspectives of the author. They argue that “There is a difference between internal and external evidence for the meaning of a poem ... The meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for him, are part of the word’s history and meaning” (10). Peter Lamarque in an account of the Wimsatt and Beardsley essay proposes that this means that “anti-intentionalism does not entail that inferences cannot be drawn from works to authors. Biographers can legitimately look to works to illuminate their subjects, even if critics should not look to biography to explain their meaning” (181). The response of some academic critics continues to be particularly critical

when literary biography indulges in the “biographical fallacy” and makes judgements about a poem or novel based on evidence from a writer’s life. Terry Eagleton comments that it “is as though the art gets buried in the life” and “the whole point of the writer’s enterprise - the writing itself - is consigned to secondary status” (“Buried in the Life” 89). He suggests that critics seek patterns while biographers just record what happened in someone’s life and as a result it is merely a “rather philistine genre” (89). But whilst it may not be the task of literary criticism, or indeed biography, to establish direct ties between an author and his or her work, it may be the task of literary biography to not only record what happened in a writer’s life but to understand the process of authorship; in other words how what happened to them transformed their writing, and vice versa.



## Chapter 2

### How Biographers Have Responded To Their Critics

#### The Supposed Singularity of Biographical Subject and Narrative

Contrary to the criticisms of Liz Stanley and Mary Evans, biographers are not always looking for a fixed representation of their subjects. An analysis of published criticism and other writing about biography since the 1970s by biographers and other critics indicates a recognition that the image of a particular person being portrayed in any biography is complex. Martin Stannard proposes that there “is, of course, no literal truth about the meaning of a life ... Literal truths can shift in significance depending upon the emphasis placed upon them” (“A Matter of Life and Death” 13). Other biographers stress the composite and double-voiced nature of their subjects’ identities and the paradoxes in their lives. Jenny Uglow approaches her biography of Elizabeth Gaskell on the basis that everyone “has a multiple life to some degree and each self has its own story, the narratives flowing together, separate yet overlapping, like threads in a weave” (93). In *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004), Stephen Greenblatt focuses on something which he calls a ‘double consciousness’ in Shakespeare, given that he “was a man who spent his money on a coat of arms but who mocked the pretentiousness of such a claim ... a man who spent his life and his deepest energies on the theatre but who laughed at the theatre and regretted making himself a show” (155). Bernard Crick also sees doubleness in the life of his subject, George Orwell: the private man, Eric Blair, “came to adopt the Orwell part of himself as an ideal image to be lived up to” (28). A sense of paradox is important to Andrew Lycett in his biographies *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes* (2008) and *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (2003). In the case of Conan Doyle, Lycett suggests that becoming “a spiritualist so soon after creating the quintessentially rational Sherlock Holmes ... [was] the central paradox of Arthur’s life” (138); with Thomas his “English and Welsh

sides are reciprocal sources of inspiration and innovation” (2). He concludes that “from a biographer’s point of view, this has made Dylan a more interesting figure – if, paradoxically, more difficult to pin down, as he darts between, and hides behind, different personalities, groups of people, and traditions” (2). In *Bernard Shaw: The One Volume Definitive Edition* (1997), Michael Holroyd explains that he wanted to “demythologise [Shaw] without reducing him” (xii), and in doing so to find out more about the many aspects of his personality and humanity which reveal a complex private man hiding his vulnerabilities, as well as a publicly successful one. For Holroyd this illustrates that the “art of life therefore is the art of heroic paradox” (xii); he suggests in particular that it is the understanding of such paradoxes in life that readers seek through biography. For the biographer his or her search for an understanding about the life and character of a particular subject may in many ways lie in the nature of this doubleness and complexity. An understanding of identity as composite, as in these instances, requires a view of biographical narrative as relative and a construction.

The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin can inform our understanding of the complex nature of biographical writing, in particular of the relationship between biographer and subject, by introducing the notion of different voices within any text. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), Bakhtin suggests that the novel has been influenced by biography and other nonfiction genres: “the confession, the diary, travel notes, biography, the personal letter and several others. All these genres may not only enter the novel as one of its essential structural components, but may also determine the form of the novel as a whole” (321). For Bakhtin not only is the novel informed by biography, but dialogic discourse informs biography – in fact all forms of nonfiction: “in the humanities ... there arises the specific task of establishing, transmitting and interpreting the words of others (for example, the problem of sources in the methodology of the historical disciplines)” (351). He continues:

Even the driest and flattest positivism in these disciplines cannot treat the word neutrally, as if it were a thing, but is obliged to initiate talk not only about words but in words, in order to penetrate their ideological meanings - which can only be grasped dialogically, and which include evaluation and response. The forms in which a dialogic understanding is transmitted and interpreted may, if the understanding is deep and vigorous, even come to have significant parallels with the double-voiced representations of another's discourse that we find in prose art. (353/3)

For Bakhtin, then, all utterance is dialogic; reading a biography involves a negotiation not unlike that made by the reader of fiction. David Lodge sums up the implication of Bakhtin's theory by contrasting him with Barthes:

Barthes says: because the author does not coincide with the language of the text, he does not exist. Bakhtin says, it is precisely because he does not so coincide that we must posit his existence. (99)

This suggests both the dialogic nature of biography, informed by the double-voiced nature of wider discourses within the life of any given biographical subject, as well as the dialogic nature of the voices of biographer and subject within each biography.

David Hoddeson argues that in feminist biography and autobiography "the biographer's discourse becomes the joint creation of biographer and subject - themselves composites - in which each is and is not subject and object, and the text serves as an intermediary space within which the biography is constituted" ("Transference and Biography" 330). This idea of authorship in biography recalls Bakhtin. Both challenge the criticism that it is inappropriate to hear the voice of the biographer in his or her work and suggest that biography rather than ignoring the dialogic nature of discourse actually embraces an ongoing interplay between biographical subject and biographer within a biographical text. In this analysis the composite natures of biographer and of his or her subject blend and clash

within the biographical text creating a discourse based on the voices of both the biographer and the subject.

Literary biographers are also concerned to make clear the relationship their subject has with others, to see the subject as something more than a “solitary genius”. If biography focuses exclusively on one individual it remains open to criticism, especially if the ‘voice’ of a biographical subject seems to undervalue the influence of others. Richard Ellmann argues that “biography is essentially social. For the biographer, who himself represents the outside world, the self only comes to exist when juxtaposed with other people. The solitary self is a pressure upon the social self, or a repercussion of it, but it has no independent life” (*Inaugural Lecture* 4). Zachary Leader agrees that “the author typically draws on a range of personal and institutional collaborators, including family, friends, publishers, reviewers and readers” (15) and in his biography of Kingsley Amis he shows how deeply Amis’s most successful novels were indebted to the influences and direct collaborative effort of others, not only Philip Larkin but Amis’s son, Martin, his wife, Hilary, and their friend Mavis Nicholson. Similarly, Andrew Motion believes that his subject, John Keats “is fascinatingly ‘formed by circumstances’”, but also, he insists, “wonderfully self creative” (xxv). Rejecting critics of the notion of genius, Motion goes on to comment that Keats was very young when he produced his greatest poetry so “Accounts of his reading, his friendships, his psychological imperatives, his poetic ‘axioms’, his politics, and his context can never completely explain this marvellous achievement. The story of his life must also allow for other things – things which have become embarrassing or doubtful for many critics in the late twentieth century, but are still, as they always were, actual and undeniable: inspiration, accident, genius”( xxvi). And, in her biography of the Brontë family, Juliet Barker argues that

it is the fact that they were such an extraordinary close family that is the key to their achievements. Taking one of them out of context creates the sort of imbalance and

distortion of facts that has added considerably to the Brontë legend ... In this biography I have deliberately chosen to write about the whole Brontë family, hoping that this will redress the balance and enable the reader to see the Brontës as they lived, not in isolation but as a tightly knit group. (xviii)

As far as the charge that biographers misuse information from diaries, letters and other autobiographical sources my point is not to claim that no biographer ever naively accepts evidence from letters and diaries as reliable, it is rather to acknowledge that some biographers have recognised the dangers of doing so, in terms like those Stanley Fish and other theorists have identified. In responding to their critics biographers have shown that they are aware that diaries, letters and journals may be unreliable as sources of biographical evidence and that biographical subjects may write them with one eye on a wider readership. Although for Park Honan letters “reveal tones, rhythms, diction, images, and kinds of details and universals the subject has chosen to make himself or herself clear” (11), he recognises that letters should be used with caution: “accurate conveying of feeling is perilously difficult; if we quote short, intense passages from letters, we deprive them of the context that seems to convey part of the feeling” (15). In responding to Janet Malcolm’s ironic perspective, noted earlier, that “Letters are the great fixative of experience ... they are biography’s only conduit to unmediated experience” (110), Frederick Karl, biographer of Conrad, among others, takes her literally and suggests that “letters are notoriously unreliable; they are as fictional as autobiography, with which they share the subject’s perception of himself.... Quite contrary to what Malcolm says, letters – like diaries and journals – are among the most deceptive materials we have in biography; and they must be handled not as documentation but as part of the ‘fiction’ the subject has made of his life” (22). John Haffenden is also dismissive of the belief that a biographer can seek out the truth about his or her subject through a study of their letters: “the truth that letters contain is a highly selective matter.... to suggest that letters offer

a key to ‘coherence of personality’ ... is almost to blind oneself to the difference between truth and twaddle” (14). William St Clair, biographer of Shelley and the Godwins, goes so far as to state that: “Questions about the nature of biographical evidence lie at the heart of the whole biographical enterprise ... [autobiographical] sources ... are normally likely to be an unrepresentative record of the patterns of the lived life” (224). And finally, David Ellis, biographer of Lawrence, sees all autobiographical material as tainted by the influence of either social or cultural trends, and by the eye of the writer on potential readers: “the tone of letters is largely dependent on the addressee; but private diaries are also rarely written without a listener or reader in mind, even if that imagined listener is posterity or a supernatural power. This means that the very idiom in which a subject’s ‘free will’ expresses itself is also socially or culturally constrained, and that those statements habitually quoted in biographies as expressive of direct, uncontaminated thought or feeling can therefore be conditioned by their context as a public address” (168). Richard Ellmann claimed that letters can be seen as a literary form “through which writer and recipient play a game of concealment and revealment” (“Freud and Literary Biography” 69). So, the perspective of these biographers suggests that the point here is not so much whether letters are vehicles of an authentic autobiographical voice, but rather to recognise their dialogic role in enabling the biographer to explore questions of authorship in the writing, reading and material life of his or her subject.

### **On Speculation, Fiction and Narrative Technique**

Biographers are aware of the frequent and damaging charge that they resort to inappropriate speculation when facts about a life are missing or open to misinterpretation. Bernard Crick, biographer of George Orwell, reflects a view from 1980 which remains relevant to the debate today: he argues that as a biographer one “only has the evidence that

one can find ... the texture of ... [a biography] is necessarily lumpy and uneven” (31). He is adamant that “when one does have to speculate, when a gap in the evidence seems crucial to the coherence of other parts of the record, one should simply say so clearly.... A biographer has a duty to show how he reaches his conclusions, not to pretend to omniscience; and he should share things that are moot, problematic and uncertain with the reader” (31). Stannard agrees and emphasises that “there should be no speculation without documentation” (“A Matter of Life and Death” 12) and that it “should be a matter of honour for a biographer to be honest, true at least to his reading of the available evidence” (12). Jonathan Coe, in his biography of B.S. Johnson, sees his guiding principle as “to tell the story as much as I can in Johnson’s own words, quoting directly, and in the words of those who have spoken to me about him. The result will be fragmentary, unpolished. There will be gaps ... And where I lapse into speculation, I shall try to be upfront about it. I shall try to be honest” (8). I will argue in this study that biographers do speculate but, as the examples given above show, often appreciate the significance of biographical integrity, which prescribes that they use available evidence honestly.

Kenneth Silverman, biographer of Edgar Allen Poe, among others, has disputed the accusation that biographers invent to make their narratives and stories livelier. They make them livelier in other ways. Biographers “can and do use many of the devices of narrative shapeliness, mostly drawn from nineteenth-century realistic fiction. But they do so rhetorically, taking rhetoric in the classical sense, as an art of persuasion” (Part III). He goes on to point out that “To dramatize the subject’s life, they describe his or her features and costume, set the scene where an event takes place, use dialogue-like quotations from letters and journals, break the narrative at moments of tension. And the best biographers experiment with fiction-like aspects of the form ... To confide artfully is the challenge, to use the evidentiary problems to enhance the biography’s feel of authenticity, even to create a certain

suspense” (Part III). At the same time he insists that the facts about a life must be based on available evidence. For Silverman, biography “aims not merely at informing but also at moving the reader, through the spectacle of another soul’s journey through existence. The art of biography consists of producing affecting narrative while remaining utterly faithful to the documents” (Part III). Benton has similarly argued about the importance of narrative in biography: “Literary biography then is a hybrid art in which a body of facts is crossbred with the arts of narrative. In distinguishing between historical events and their discourse of representation, narrative theory is responsive to this hybridity” (*Journal of Aesthetic Education* 52). I also believe that it is important to look at how modern biography uses figurative language, descriptive narrative and interpretation by the biographer to tell a story about a subject’s life and give a point of view about this life and about others close to him or her.

A number of biographers since the 1970s have emphasised the importance of a biographer’s writing style and use of language and questions about the nature of biographical narrative are central to this study. I will argue that there are important distinctions to be made in discussing the nature of rhetoric and use of fictional devices in biographical writing. As evidence of the importance biographers attach to style and language, consider Justin Kaplan, biographer of Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, who suggests that “a strong case should be made for enlarging the form ‘literary biography’ to include books that have literary qualities and not necessarily literary subjects” (1). Similarly Catherine Drinker Bowen, biographer of John Adams and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others, thinks that in particular “English biographers are notably concerned with style ... and such matters as the sustaining of a book’s tone throughout” (xi). Bowen argues that every biography needs a plot, alongside a central animating theme, and scenes which identify “big” things that happened in the life. The story should move to a climax: the theme is the “axis upon which its wheels may turn” (9)



and the subject must “come alive” (9). Writing in the 1990s Park Honan, who has written biographies of Matthew Arnold, Jane Austen, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, agrees that “the biographer [should] not only be aware of style but exploit it, all of the resources of language, with great delicacy in order to convey what is personal and factual in the historical evidence we have” (*Author’s Lives* 33). Honan argues that documents do not just provide evidence of facts but their “first function is to direct imagination” (33) and he believes that biographers “have made too little use of stylistic variety ... they have thought too little about the properties of narrative” (39). Paula Backscheider, biographer of Daniel Defoe, laments that “modern biography is not considered a literary genre” (234) and that biographers do not see themselves as literary artists. Her study of biography in the late 1990s identified writing style as “the least studied aspect” (234) of the genre.

Some biographers have accepted the criticism that biographical narrative is rooted in the conventions of the nineteenth century realist novel. Ann Thwaite was pleased when a bookseller told her that he had enjoyed her biography of Edmund Gosse “as if it were a nineteenth century novel” (26). Mark Kinkead-Weekes, biographer of D.H. Lawrence, embraces the cradle to grave narrative, arguing for strict chronology in biography as in nineteenth-century realist fiction: the “chronological method ... tends to show up the gaps in the evidence which confident analysis conceals. It constantly throws the emphasis on the experience of the biographee rather than the commentary of the biographer” (251). For Catherine Peters, “The biographer, like any romantic novelist, believes in the importance of a central character and a strong and logically connected narrative which ... proceeds from cradle to grave in an unbroken arc” (44). James Clifford also argues that biography continues to operate within “the vicinity of the realist novel” (54) and Robert Skidlesky argues similarly that mid-to-late-twentieth century biography continues to be written in the context of Victorian realism: “Truth is equated with length, with ‘telling all’, with piling detail on

detail.... it is the requirements of scholarship, as much as anything else, which tethers contemporary biography to its Victorian ancestors” (9). For Justin Kaplan the “biography at its best emulates – perhaps anachronistically – the imaginative world of the great classic novels.... It renders individual character in the round, tells a generously contexted story that has a beginning, middle, and end, and may even suggest a degree of social continuity and personal responsibility” (2). These perspectives make it clear that many biographers consciously accept the realist nature of the genre in its traditional form, fully aware of its fictional origins.

Other biographers acknowledge the criticism of the omniscient narrator in biography. One reason for the popularity of biography, according to Martin Stannard, is that

in our ‘postmodern’ age, the collapse of the realist novel has left a gap in the market. Readers who prefer a plain tale, authoritatively told, turn to biography for the security of well drawn characters, a hero or heroine, and satisfying closure. Just as the eighteenth century novel often masqueraded as biography ... so biographies today can masquerade as novels ... The narrators in these books often take on the function of the omniscient, intrusive narrator of realist fiction. (“The Necrophiliac Art?” 33)

However, Stannard, a biographer himself, wants, unlike the biographers cited in the previous paragraph, to demolish the biographer’s “pretence of being the omniscient narrator of a realist fiction” (“The Necrophiliac Art?” 38) – so that we can hear the voice of the subject more clearly. For Diane Middlebrook, this wish is an impossibility: “biography has never functioned simply as an arrangement of facts; it is a narrative, with a point of view” (159). What these quotations from contemporary biographers suggest, is that however they choose to shape their narratives, they are aware of the charge that their work is in thrall to the conventions of nineteenth-century realist fiction.

As part of the postmodern critique of biography's realist assumptions Barthes advocates the use of what he calls the 'biographeme': "were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections" (*Sade, Fourier, Loyola* 9). In similar fashion, Sean Burke notes that Plutarch believed that a one-off revelatory comment could reveal more about someone than an account of major events. Burke argues that for Barthes, the biographeme is an "encapsulation, the paradigmatic instant in an authorial life that somehow calls back to being the embarrassed essence of a life as lived. Stasis and portraiture replace the monumental biographies of the post Johnsonian era" (195). Examples of recent biographies which most obviously adopt this approach include James Shapiro's biography of one year in Shakespeare's life, *1599* (2005), Frances Wilson's *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth* (2008), and Adam Sisman's biography of the relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge, *The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge* (2006), focusing on the years when this friendship was at its strongest. For Wilson a focus on Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere Journals, written over two and half years when she was living with her brother William Wordsworth in Dove Cottage, reveals "the love between a brother and a sister" (5). Wilson suggests that it "is not unusual to think of this or that moment in the lives of ourselves or of others as representing a beginning, end or turning point, or to see a certain experience as signalling a high or a low mark, a peak or a trough. One of the advantages enjoyed by a biographer is the opportunity to plot the pattern of a life as if on a graph – to say with some certainty that this or that year represented either the best or the worst of times for the person being written about" (14)<sup>10</sup>. Burke gives a note of caution – this approach may

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<sup>10</sup> Even more biographers, in addition to those highlighted in the next section, have commented on the role of anecdotes and key turning points in biographical writing. For Robert Gittings anecdotes are part of the "biographer's art of catching the focal moment among the thousands that make up a human story" (81). Nadjie Al-Ali in her research into the experience of women involved in political activities in Egypt argues that "Many of the women ... made reference to a series of decisive moments or turning points that worked in conjunction with prevailing ideas of particular political eras to shape their consciousness" (170).

only offer “an eerie crystallisation, an epiphanic moment or revelatory feature that can only define a life in the manner of a snapshot, a hostage, a lie against time” (195). In other words, Wilson’s suggestion that any given anecdote can give evidence of an encapsulation, or a turning point should be tempered with a ‘health warning’ that such an interpretation by a biographer is only a version of what may or may not have happened, and such a snapshot may fall into the same trap as realist narrative by trying to seek out the essence of any one life.

The use of the biographeme is also a technique employed by biographers in more traditionally organised biographies. Ian MacKillop, a biographer of F.R. Leavis, argues that one way of representing a subject in biography is through vignettes, sketches or caricatures because they are “a way of enabling the reader to see, but also rethink, the subject of a biography” (297); they give a “whole picture, or ‘character sketch’” (297) and are used as “an aesthetic device, a deliberate use of art, a trope” (297). Isobel Grundy, biographer of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, also sees “the moment” as revelatory, at the core of a narrative: it is “the momentary images of the dream, the fragments left standing alone, the details still verifiable from the past, out of which any story has to be fashioned” (109). And in the same collection of essays about the genre, Stannard writes of how “certain images and anecdotes [in the life as in the work] will crystallize out as significant metaphors” (“A Matter of Life and Death” 11). At the same time, the dangers of such an approach are noted. Joan Hedrick, biographer of Harriet Beecher Stowe, reflects that the insertion of a particular anecdote or incident in a biography “may subtly divert the narrative.... The incident must not only fit the flow of the story, it must be attached by invisible threads to the grand scheme of the book” (163). How some contemporary biographers use key moments and anecdotes are discussed in forthcoming chapters.

## **Biography, the Individual and the Voice of the Narrator**

In response to critics who disapprove of biography's focus on the individual, some biographers have been keen to stress the representative character of their individual subjects. The historian and biographer Barbara Tuchman claims that as "a prism of history biography attracts and holds the reader's interest in the larger subject ... [and] encompasses the universal in the particular" (134). Similarly, Park Honan suggests that biography offers us "as much value in telling us about history, society, and group codes, as about one person" (188/9). And Jonathan Bate considers how in attempting to understand Shakespeare, "We have to shuffle back and forth between the Shakespearean mind and what has usefully been called 'the Shakespearean moment'. Shakespeare's uniqueness must be held in balance with his typicality" (*Soul of the Age* 3). Some biographers have taken this criticism on board and recognise that biography should be concerned with social and cultural issues as well as individual subjectivity, and that it must inevitably be concerned with its subject's relationship with others. For example, in his biography of Iris Murdoch Peter Conradi wanted, among other things, to record "her imaginative indebtedness to her Oxford generation" (xxiv) and "to start the job of setting her work in the context of the cultural/intellectual life of the mid-twentieth century" (xxiv). There are two perspectives tied up here: one sees biography as social because it is concerned with connections between people, another asks biography to recognize political, economic and cultural forces at work in the story of any one life.

For Richard Ellmann, "biography is essentially social" (*An Inaugural Lecture* 4), by which he means, in the case of literary biography, not only that it involves other people, but that it should challenge the purist view of art as an aesthetic object. The work of any literary subject, he writes, "appears less as an object than as a convergence of energies, a momentary delay of forces that come from the individual and from society as well as from the literary

tradition. The void is peopled by works, lives, circumstances, pressures. As the work loses the autotelic privacy which purist critics have sought to ascribe to it, it enters an interfusion of art and life” (*A Long the Riverrun* 114). More recently, Brenda Wineapple, the biographer of Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others, suggests that “if biography is the story of an individual life, it is also the story of lives over time and in time, among beliefs, rituals, events, ideology.... Everybody is connected to anybody” (41). Catherine Peters, whose biographical subjects include Dickens, advises caution in assuming that biography is only about one life: “this concentration on one life, to which all others must become secondary, distorts both the historical record, and perhaps even more importantly, the central figure itself. For there is no such thing as a ‘secondary life’ in the real world” (46). She proposes that a biographer “has to create something half-way between a vivid but distorted portrait of the subject and an integrated but indistinct figure in a landscape” (46). Feminist biographers in particular have reflected this concern in their work.

Joan Hedrick believes that a biographer should see her subject within the context of wider cultural and gender roles. In her study of Harriet Beecher-Stowe, Hedrick looked at what

made Stowe’s experience appear normative within her culture, and [this] provided a yardstick from which to measure her departure from the norm. I suppose this is ultimately how we bring individuals into focus: by sorting out what is cultural and what is individual in their responses ... Making these connections between her private and her public life – connections very natural when one is writing of a woman – created a narrative that was neither the male plot of ambition nor the female plot of waiting at home ... Some of the topics I explored would rarely appear in the biography of a man. (164)

Elizabeth Gaskell's biographer Jenny Uglow is similarly keen to portray her as someone engaged with her local community yet responding to the wider world. Uglow argues that the "richness of Gaskell's fiction derives from the very fullness of the daily life which constricted her writing time. She moved in a world where personal contacts and the flow of ideas were so interconnected that the idea of a web will not do.... A better image is that of overlapping circles, drawn by a compass whose point is fixed in a central circle of Elizabeth's family, marriage and faith. Family relationships shade into a wider Unitarian circle, and this in turn overlaps with others – philanthropic, political, literary, scientific ... Such rings then touch and connect with others" (309). One of the major shifts in biography achieved by feminist approaches and the reinterpretation of history which Evans among others believes it offers, has been a move away from a focus on public lives, and a turn to a wider landscape which includes the domestic and private in women's lives, highlighting issues of gender, class and the power dynamics in key relationships.

In recent years there has been a growth in group biography, of families, friends, professional peers, which Margot Peters, a biographer of Charlotte Brontë, believes shows that success achieved by an individual is often "a composite effort" (43) involving a range of people; group biography "sees that the course of human events depends less on individualism than upon the endless ramifications of human interaction, much of which is beyond control or even consciousness" (44). The growth of biographies about women and group biography in the late twentieth century has increased the range of voices portrayed in biography, challenging the status of traditional biography. It also challenges the narrative conventions of traditional biography. Sara Alpern, the biographer of the journalist Freda Kirchwey, calls into question the traditional chronological structure of the genre and encourages an interest in thematic approaches. For Alpern, "feminist biography not only expands our knowledge about women's lives but alters the frameworks within which we interpret historical experience"

(13). Alpern believes that feminism's engagement "with biography has helped us illuminate the lives of vanished or obscure individual women, our own experience, and the broadest reaches of women's history and of historical change in general" (13). To another feminist biographer, Linda Wagner Martin, the "aim of revising history – or at least women's personal history – is shared by all biographers of women subjects" (162). Feminist biography challenges the narrative conventions of traditional biography and gives a voice to the forgotten and obscure lives of women.

There have been some reservations about aspects of this feminist perspective. Victoria Olsen notes that whereas "in the seventies writing biographies of women, especially neglected figures, was radical, novel, and perhaps self-evidently important" (77), later critics and readers began asking such awkward questions as: are all women valid subjects; are all biographies of women feminist; how should feminist scholars represent subjects who did not consider themselves feminist; and is there a tendency in biographies of women subjects to view them as victims? More generally, Olsen warns that "while it is undeniably important to look for causes and effects in people's lives, to study influences, and to speculate about inspiration, those questions are too big and complex to build a biography around without running the grave risk of overdetermining one's argument and oversimplifying one's subject" (83). She also warns against the magisterial voice in feminist as well as 'majority' biography.

A study of South African auto/biography edited by Judith Coullie explains that in the 1980s auto/biography<sup>11</sup> of apartheid's most oppressed people was being published for the

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<sup>11</sup> The study of auto/biography is an area which warrants further research but is outside the remit of this study. By this I mean not the separate study of autobiography and biography, but a study of the relationship between them and other first and third person narratives, such as diaries, letters and memoirs. Laura Marcus, in her book *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (1994), writes about the relationship between autobiography and biography in nineteenth century life-writing: "The essayists of the late nineteenth century, writing about biography and autobiography as 'men of letters', share in a developing interest in unconscious life and creativity in late nineteenth-century psychology ... The fascination with 'genius' in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychology governs auto/biographical discourse in this period" (56). Discussing late twentieth century life-writing Mary Evans argues that "the first change that we can see in the recent development of auto/biography is a move towards the inclusion of more information about what is often described as the



first time and in the 1990s gained greater prestige in the academy. Coullie acknowledges that “autobiography and biography are widely characterised as practices embedded in and reproducing the cultural values and practices of individualism and introspection” (39), but she suggests that the collection of papers in her book argue that interviews with biographers suggest the “possibility that auto/biographical practice can survive in collectivist cultures” (39). Contemporary postcolonial biographers see identity in relational terms and look for collaboration, and shared lives. They are alert “to the involvement of a host of people in the making of auto/biographical accounts, thus challenging monological notions of authorship and the subject that are associated with European Modernity” (45). Another study, edited by Rosalia Baena, about auto/biography in Canada, takes a similar approach when she argues that:

Though life-writing must be located within specific historical and social contexts, its engagement with and revision of traditional critical paradigms, forms and canonical prescriptions strategically rearticulates their subject positionalities and challenges dominant ideologies. (vii)

Baena sees her approach in a transcultural; rather than using the term ‘multicultural’, she prefers “transcultural” to “refer to the manner in which the dominant culture “becomes part of a larger, looser structure within which literary texts which foreground the experience of ‘minority’ as opposed to ‘dominant’ groups both present themselves and are received as representative, even paradigmatic forms for an entire social formation, and not just for the ethnic or racial group with which the text’s author is associated” (vii). These studies are

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private life of individuals. The second change that is discernible - and again very much part of recent literary history - is the subject of auto/biography” (7).

giving a clear message that the study of individual lives provides representative<sup>12</sup> “stories” which are also contributions to a collective “voice”.

### Identification in Biography

The contemporary historian Alun Munslow, who has written a group biography of six American intellectuals, argues that biography “regularly fails to observe the two basic precepts of conventional historical thinking, the separation of knower (historian) and known (object) and the priority of content (object) over form (its representation)” (“Biography and History” 228). This section will address the separation of knower and known.

Leon Edel, author of a groundbreaking five-volume biography of Henry James, is clear that the relationship of the biographer to his subject “is the very core of the biographical enterprise” (*Writing Lives* 14):

Biographers must be warm, yet aloof, involved, yet uninvolved. To be cold as ice in appraisal, yet warm and human and understanding, this is the biographer’s dilemma. (*Writing Lives* 41)

Victoria Glendinning agrees that biographers have to be careful not to identify too closely with their subject: “It is probably true that compulsive biographers immerse themselves in other people’s lives as a way of obliquely investigating their own, but this is the biographer’s own business.... you do have to struggle to preserve detachment (if that is your aim) and neither to punish nor be excessively partisan” (“Lies and Silences” 54). Michael Holroyd is

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<sup>12</sup> The extent to which biographies can present lives of representative figures is one of the contentious issues in debates about the genre and will be explored further in a chapter on the work of Richard Holmes. In *The Spirit of the Age and the State of the Art* (2009), Meg Jensen discusses a conference held at Kingston University in 2007 from which essays in this book are drawn, highlighting that the aim of the conference was “to encourage debate not only across disciplines but across the practice/theory divide” (xxx). The conference, “The Spirit of the Age”, “took its title from Hegel’s suggestion that the ‘great man of the age is the one who can put into words the will of his age ... he can actualise his age’” (xxx) and this is a key theme in this study. Stephen Greenblatt argues “from the thousands, we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns ... who seem ... to express and even, by design, to embody [their culture’s] dominant satisfactions and anxieties” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 6). In a later chapter I make a distinction between a man or woman who represents genius, and stands apart from the wider community of which they were part whilst commenting on it and a biographical figure, as defined by Greenblatt, who can serve as a representative of his or her peer group.

also aware of the danger of seeking intimacy with one's subject and sees this as "one of the cardinal sins of biography, the aim of which is to resurrect the dead and not be absorbed into a dead world oneself" (*Works on Paper* 35). Richard Ellmann doubts that biographers are fixated on their heroes or are unaware of the dangers of identification: "if a modern biographer identifies himself a little with his subject, he does so reservedly, and withdraws a bit at the same time" ("Freud and Literary Biography" 65). Martin Stannard in *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions* (1996) looks at the issue from two perspectives: "An intimacy between subject and writer is implied which can be construed positively or negatively. A positive construction might argue that this empathy is a precondition of all good literary biography; a negative, that such reciprocation is wholly imaginary, self-seeking, a kind of aesthetic masturbation" ("A Necrophiliac Art" 33). He believes that "no matter how even-handed you try to be with evidence, there are always two stories being told: that of your subject, and that of your relationship with your subject. The biographer can never eradicate that tone of voice which reveals him as participant in the narrative, nor should he" (40). In *Writing the Lives of Writers* (1998), Ruth Kennedy agrees that "whatever the data, we re-create our subject in the light of our contemporary and our personal image" ("Recreating Chaucer" 54). And in *The Art of Literary Biography* (1995), Humphrey Carpenter believes that as biographers "we're all really writing about ourselves. That's the hidden agenda" (273). And feminist biographers<sup>13</sup> have acknowledged, and indeed celebrated, this identification with their subjects.

For Sara Alpern, "our heightened consciousness of the role of gender meant an especially close relationship with our subjects ... writing a woman's life requires an active, not a neutral, voice from the biographer" (10). Linda Wagner Martin, a biographer of Sylvia

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<sup>13</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, feminists in the late twentieth century understood biography as a genre which could reflect the private as well as the professional aspects of any woman's life and could inform arguments about the dynamic of power and control in gender relationships. As Hermione Lee suggests, "Biographies that speak for alternative or hidden lives, especially women's ... grow out of a feminist interest in 'hidden histories'" (*A Very Short Introduction* 127).

Plath, goes so far as to suggest that “Identification with the subject is the attraction of the form ... women readers are demanding narratives of women’s lives told with one focus on the subject’s interior life and another on the external values and conflicts they, as women, recognize” (4). As Wagner-Martin suggests, “in most cases [of biographies of women subjects by a female biographer] the biographer has somehow identified with the community that surrounds the subject’s life” (133). Isobel Grundy agrees that the biographer’s views “can be enlisted to help, not impede, the process of orchestrating opposing views ... a feminist speaker can contextualise the voices she quotes” (114). For Joan Hedrick an “act of sympathetic identification achieves what a whole chapter of arguments may not” (“Biography as Interdisciplinary Art” 162); in selecting material she found herself “making my story more important than her story ... I mean my understanding of my subject’s story, my vision of what her life was like” (162). But she realises that “we must always be wary of conflating protagonist and author, and of identifying too fully with our subject; the danger of converting a biography into an autobiography in disguise is always there” (193). So, questions of representation become central in biographies where the subject reflects a wider collective voice of peers, which includes both the biographical subject and her biographer.

Many other biographers agree that in writing biographies biographers go through a process of self discovery and develop a relationship with their subjects which can lead to identification. For Adam Sisman, part of the biographical process is finding a thread that connects his own experience with that of his subjects (in an interview for this thesis). Ian Hamilton admits that his work on the biography of J D Salinger was based on “infatuation, an infatuation that bowled me over at the age of seventeen” (112), and one which he only outgrew when Salinger chased him relentlessly through the courts to stop publication of his ‘life in writings’. To Miranda Seymour, if it is “likely that what will emerge is an amalgamation of the subject and the self, then the best a biographer can do is to be aware of

that and to be on guard against it. Biography should be, and rarely is, a selfless art” (“Shaping the Truth” 266). As suggested earlier, biographers are collaborators<sup>14</sup> in the story of their subjects’ lives, and they too become part of the story.

## **Biography, History and Non Fiction**

Two complex dynamics or tensions must be negotiated by biographers: between fact and fiction, and between historical and ontological understanding of others and ourselves. On the one hand, biography can be understood as rooted in fact, objective and material information about ourselves and others, described in chronological narrative composed of recounted actions and events without speculation or intervention by the narrator. On the other hand, recounting the nature of a life, especially when the focus is on the inner life of a biographical subject, may require speculation in a creative or invented narrative framed by figurative language and style. This thesis aims to show that biography cannot be understood within the context of such either/or oppositions. The authenticity we find in each biography will always be relative and questions asked about narrative in nonfiction need to interrogate the nuances of discursive practices in biography. As Michael Holroyd puts it: “between history and the novel stands biography, their unwanted offspring, which has brought a great embarrassment to them both” (*Works on Paper* 8). Biography, as biographers themselves attest, is a mixed or hybrid genre, which in part accounts for the hostility it has encountered, from theorists and practitioners of both history and literature.

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Holroyd suggests that the biographer offers their subject “the chance of what amounts to a posthumous work written in collaboration” (16). Paula Backscheider helps to explain this when she proposes that “Good biography must be a collaboration - even with a lead subject, there must be empathy and a real understanding of the social, emotional and historical world” (45) and that biography is now “the dynamic interaction of lives, those of biographer, subject, and reader” (162). I would argue that Holroyd understands this and is arguing, a view supported in this thesis, that a biographer draws on a similar range of collaborators, including the life and work of his or her biographical subject. If one accepts Roland Barthes’ view that “text is ... a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture ... [and] the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the one with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (“Death of the Author” 146) then perhaps his analysis must be equally valid for both biographer and literary biographical subject, both of whom are writers.

Ira Nadel, the biographer of Tom Stoppard and Ezra Pound, among others, is influenced by the historian and theorist of history, Hayden White, mentioned in Chapter One. Nadel developed a theory of biographical narrative in the 1980s based on what he calls the ‘process of biography’, which is used to compare the ‘real’ and the ‘represented’. Through this process of authentication readers decide if they believe in the interpretation given by the biographer. He argues that multiple lives of the same subject are needed to unsettle the past and correct, reassess and revise the interpretation of lives. Alternative plots and narrative forms give rise to new interpretations: “Versions of a life exist not because the facts may differ but because of differing conceptions of what form of story-telling, of narrative, is best suited to the facts.... Each biography of the same individual has a different story to tell ... because the plot structures available to, and employed by, the biographer differ” (*Fiction, Fact and Form* 103). Nadel believes that the best biographies

re-invent rather than re-construct. Biography is fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language – a goal similar to that of fiction. A biography is a verbal artefact of narrative discourse. Its tool, figurative language, organizes its form.... the transformation of events into story takes place, as Hayden White has explained, through ‘the suppression or subordination of certain (events) ... and the highlighting of others, by characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like’. (8)

For Nadel a biographer is “a creative writer of non-fiction” (11). In one of his more controversial statements, Nadel describes biography as “authorized fictions” (100). Responding to a review of his book, Nadel argued that: “My central thesis is not ‘biography ought to be more fictional’ but that it is more fictional than readers and critics have admitted.

Simply stated, my goal is not a new model for biography but a new model for reading biography” (*Biography* 359):

The existence in biography of what I call ‘authorised fictions’ underscores the response of the genre to be both factual and literary, historical and artistic. The feature also recognises today’s commonplace that we live our lives as fictions and that we act within a set of guiding narrative structures. (359)

Behind this last quotation from Nadel is Barthes, declaring that “any biography is a novel which dares not speak its name” (*The Tel Quel Reader* 249). This view takes on quite a different perspective – a more extreme perspective than Nadel accepts – when quoted in the context of other remarks Barthes makes in the same published interview: “As for the more specific opposition between fiction and criticism, I have often said that this opposition breaks down within the present crisis of the novel, within the crisis of criticism, and in respect of the advent of the Text. In the transitory state of present production, the roles are simply confused, without yet being abolished ... I don’t see myself as a critic, but rather as a novelist” (262). Critics Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooke suggest that what Barthes is arguing is that “when we read as critics, we can never step outside discourse and adopt a position invulnerable to a subsequent interrogative reading. All discourses, including critical interpretations, are equally fictive; none stand apart in the place of Truth” (149). Jacques Derrida takes this point even further. Behind Nadel’s view of biography as ‘authorized fiction’ lurks the full Derridean view not only of all discourse as fiction or text but of life itself as fiction or text:

when I said there is ‘nothing outside of the text’ I didn’t mean ‘text’ in the sense of what is written in the book; I first generalised the concept of text, of trace – ‘text’ is not just, say literature or philosophy but life in general. Life after theory is a text. Life

is a text, but then we have to change the rules, change the concept of text and that is what I try to do. (*Life After Theory* 27)

The extremity of such a view connects to some current biographical practice as a license for hybridity. For Derrida the lines between all genres are flexible and permeable: “Every text participates in one and several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (“Law of Genre” 230). The law of genre is “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity” (227). Nadel is by no means the only current biographer to have been influenced by the idea that the boundaries between genres are fluid and that all discourse, fiction or nonfiction, verbal or written, are dialogic.

For Nadel, “the aim of biography is not so much to convey the ‘facts’, which it linguistically cannot do objectively, but to present an attitude, perspective or point of view regarding those ‘facts’. It accomplishes this through its rhetorical and linguistic properties, most noticeably in its use of literary tropes” (*Fiction, Fact and Form* 208). Nadel calls for an approach to biography which looks “less at the historical development of the genre and more at the formal properties of individual texts” (153). Miranda Seymour endorses Nadel: “[he] made the ... valuable point that ‘how a life is written, is as important as how that life was lived’” (262). Hence the importance Nadel places on the use of figurative language or tropes in biography: the “tropes are actually guides or signs to the reader of the biographer’s process of understanding or interpretation of the life of his subject which in turn creates new meaning for the life while establishing the biography as an independent text” (157). For Nadel the main tropes which have a role in biography are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Nadel is an advocate of the view that biography can address the tensions evoked by postmodernism by exploring the rhythm and flow of life through narrative: “Just as we read in rhythmic units so too, perhaps, biography should be structured and written in rhythmic units.... Furthermore biographers might rely on synecdoche more readily than chronology,



letting the part stand for the whole, writing biography of praxis rather than historia, replacing a dependency on comprehensive lives with more analytical selective lives” (181).

Recently, Alun Munslow, influenced by Nadel’s theory of biography, called for historians to recognise a “biographer’s self-consciousness about the narratively constituted nature of what he or she does” (*Rethinking History* 2) and how this impacts on the work of history as it “challenges the extent to which the-past-as-history may be regarded only as an act of objective discovery by the distanced and unified self” (4). He suggests that the making of history “is about choices not givens, about anticipating the past rather than fondly imagining we can reconstruct it” (6):

When that character called the historian enters into this performance of making history he or she will (?should) reflect on the problems of fashioning a narrative explanation.... What we end up with is the kind of ‘authorised fictions’ that Ira Nadel talks about – the imaginative re-presentation of detailed factualism based on the understanding of the biographer of how his or her subject, and for the historian events and processes, existed. The conclusion is that such biography and history may sacrifice detail and, perhaps, factual accuracy, but not meaning. I would endorse Nadel’s conclusion on biography by applying it also to history, that the disclosure of the self is a moral precondition to understanding. (6)

Munslow also suggests that:

Biographers are perhaps more ready to accept than most historians that objectivity may be logically and aesthetically impossible.... the locus of historical work is in the historian’s authorial imagination as he or she generates the forms of explanation that determine the interpretation of the content of the past. Biography’s connecting of

subject and object and the prioritizing of form over content should always make us ready to confront our conventional realist approach to writing-the-past-history. (8)

A number of literary biographers show themselves to be comparably influenced by views like this. Allen Hibbard, biographer of Paul Bowles, explores the development of fictional biographies which he calls “novels on the margins of the genre” (32). These biographies, alongside experimental biographies, can “tell us a good deal about the genre” (32). In the context of these developments,

Biography can become an intriguing site for examining and thinking through issues related to representation and narrative. The work of the biographer, just as that of the historian, becomes more and more difficult, tenuous, challenging in these post post-structuralist times when the very notion of coherent, stable subject (the premise undergirding traditional biography) is radically called into question, as well as the slippery, imprecise nature of language itself as a means of representing, any reality or event. (32)

Alix Kate Shulman, a biographer of Emma Goldman, agrees that whereas “in fiction you try to imagine an event to convey your meaning, in biography you usually try to imagine a meaning to illuminate an event. But biography and autobiography are no less fictions than novels are. Character must be imagined, significance imposed, events interpreted” (8). Graham McCann, a biographer of Marilyn Monroe and other film and TV celebrities, believes that biography “is fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language – a goal similar to that of fiction” (McCann 329). Gordon Lowry suggests that his subject, Malcolm Lowry, saw “biographical ‘truth’ as ungraspable and life as a ‘protean’ fiction. This emphasis on the fictionality of biography implies a view of life as a text undergoing constant revision and interpretation”

(269). Finally, among other possible examples, John Halperin, who has written biographies of C.P. Snow and Jane Austen among others, sees biography as “a literary artefact that can never be definitive or wholly accurate record, precisely because the biographer is always being forced to make choices” (160). Yet “fiction never lies; it reveals the writer totally ... novelists, perhaps, are the only people who tell the truth” (162). Still, as suggested in Chapter One, there is an important distinction to be made here between the use of fictional strategies or tropes, and the creative invention we find in fiction.

Martin Stannard suggests that writing “a biography is like writing a novel in which the facts may not be invented, only the form” (“A Matter of Life and Death” 12). Hilary Spurling shares Stannard’s perspective, and comments that biography must be based on facts and their collection may take years, but “in order to convey this factual material, the biography will generally, and I think inevitably, be forced to stoop to fiction ... What you are doing after all is creating a character. Here the novelist is, and always must be superior: the novelist has the edge because he knows all there is to know about his characters” (116). The importance of these distinctions will become particularly clear in my chapter on Richard Holmes which will discuss the extent to which he privileges form over content. As these examples demonstrate, it is fair to say that biographers have listened to their critics and taken on board aspects of postmodern historiography, perhaps, some would say, at the risk of further undermining the genre by accepting such criticism. For example, later chapters will discuss the extent to which Holmes has been criticised for using approaches common in fiction. I will illustrate that to some extent biography is a form open to criticism whether it remains within the confines of nineteenth century realism or instead responds positively to debates about the relationship between fiction and nonfiction.

As for the balance between an ontological or inner and an historical analysis of the self in biographical writing, many late-twentieth century critics are dismissive of the genre if

it attempts to claim that any biographer can know the inner life of his or her subject. I have interviewed nine British biographers for this study. None of them suggested that they knew the inner life of their subjects, but, as Ray Monk said, “understanding the inner life is not the same thing as knowing the inner soliloquy or what someone was thinking”. He describes biography as a process comparable to what we all do in our everyday lives as we come to understand other people; we can tell something about them by what they say, write, how they appear (in terms of dress and mood), where they live, who their friends are, how they conduct themselves in their professional life. Bernard Crick’s biography *George Orwell: A Life* (1980) again sums up a perspective which has influenced much recent biography. He believes that in the case of George Orwell, the interplay between man and writer needs to be considered, and “All his books except the last two are obviously based upon his own experiences” (35). Crick argues that it is legitimate to explore a subject’s “intentions biographically as well as ... examining the literary result” (35). But he does “not think that one can look into Orwell’s mind, or minds – or anyone else’s. The best that a biographer can do is to understand the relationship between the writer and the man ... by examining their journey together in detail ... always remembering that what they did together and how they reacted to what happened along the way will tell us more than constantly analysing and reanalysing their ‘characters’ and the difference between them” (29), and in doing so biography can “bridge gaps by empathy and intuition” (29). He is quite clear that “None of us can enter into another person’s mind; to believe so is fiction” (30), and “the only life one can write about is the life someone actually led in reaction to actual events” (33), because our “human identity consists in relationships, not inwardness” (33). Both Monk, influenced by Wittgenstein, and Crick are describing an approach to their biographical writing which reflects the view that we can achieve knowledge by treating what someone says and does as

historical events. What the biographer is doing is making connections between these events and personal relationships.

The New Historicism is central to views like these, with its distrust of speculation about 'character'. Yet to Martin Stannard, the conflict between new historical theory and biographical practice is neither as inevitable nor as intractable as it sometimes seems:

when the smoke clears, biography may act as a bridge between the high tech theorists and the practical critics as a creative site for new historicism. Biography need not be didactic. Its expressive voice need be no more than a vehicle for its subjects' text and lives. Stephen Greenblatt once famously remarked that his new historicism 'began with a desire to talk with the dead'. Biography has always begun from this point. Perhaps it might anchor us in that sea of multiple signification. ("A Matter of Life and Death" 16)

In similar manner, a recent study of Renaissance life-writing, co-edited by J.R. Mulryne, *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions for Biography* (2006), suggests that there is a need "for a newer new historicism (or post new historicism) that is critically and historically aware, humane (or humanist) in orientation, author-centred, and embraces traditional scholarship and scholarly methods" (1). Mulryne acknowledges "an awareness of the conflicting commitments to 'fact' and 'fiction' that are inherent in the form itself" (2) and argues that "shaped by experience, training and temperament, the biographer constructs his or her own" (3) version of his or her subject. But Mulryne also argues that "With the shadow of theory removed or at least suspended, and respectability returned to the practice of biography, a new liberty has ushered in an era of what one could call biographical self fashioning. While conscious, in the best cases of the constraints of detailed and more general scholarship, the new biography invites the reader to approve or reject the offered biographical account not so

much in terms of fact as of vision” (3). In other words, I understand this to mean that biography needs to balance scholarship with an approach which acknowledges the importance of narrative construction in biographical narrative and also considers how the historical events of any one life form a part of a wider historical discourse about any given social, cultural or political period.

## **Life and Work**

A final major objection to literary biography is the allegation that it seeks a direct relationship between a writer’s work and his or her life. Though literary biography draws connections between life and work, it is not true that these connections are necessarily simplistic, or underestimate the influence of other factors, including other people. For some biographers it is the non-chronological, non-linear interplay between reading, writing and material life that is important; connections are made, although not necessarily between specific events and specific pieces of writing. In interview Ray Monk suggests that “biography is about making connections and seeking to understand someone, not applying a theory or ideology to understand a subject.” There are many examples of biographies which make these sorts of connections between life and work.

Here, for example, Rosemary Ashton sums up the background which informed George Eliot’s life:

At last, as she turned thirty-seven, her unusual life bore its literary fruit. The early years of female friendship and piety, of self-analysis and self-restraint and of looking on critically at others, and the recent years of chiefly male company, educated, wide ranging, sceptical, unorthodox; the emotional poverty of her youth and the fulfilment of her young middle age; and the paradox of her situation – the unusual freedom of her life choices so inextricably bound up with society’s restrictions and exclusions –

these losses and gains in her life combine wonderfully to make up the writer George Eliot. (171)

Ashton is clear that Eliot draws on her life to inform her writing: “she was only doing what came naturally ... to draw on personal knowledge, to write authentically, to embed invented characters and episodes firmly in genuine remembered experience” (175), although she is clear that “George Eliot is not to be associated too simply with her endings; her opinions should not be read as arising directly out of the termination of her plots” (207). Ashton is interested in the way that Eliot drew on the influence of other writers, her fallibility and the tortuous hard work that is involved in her writing life. Similarly, in the opening of his biography of Muriel Spark, Martin Stannard is clear that “Her fiction is her life reconstituted” (xviii), and in the course of the biography he comments that “Her private life was the stimulus for her art. She refused to squander her raw material ... [but] [h]er art was external to herself, a transfiguration of the personal” (238). Andrew Motion argues that Keats “is fascinatingly ‘formed by circumstances’, as well as wonderfully self creative ... As the connections accumulate, they inevitably expose separations as well as links between his life and his work. This is something that all biographies must (or should) demonstrate. Art, after all, is never merely a convulsive expression of personality” (*Keats* xxv). Stephen Greenblatt is keen to make connections between life and work in his biography of Shakespeare and he describes this as a process of recycling: Shakespeare “recycled every word he ever encountered, every person he ever met, every experience he ever had” (155), and this includes his reading. Jenny Hartley sees both indirect and direct autobiographical material in Dickens: “Dickens made it his business to get to know these young women [living in Urania Cottage] closely. In return they win starring roles in his novels.... They also infiltrate themselves less directly, more insidiously and to stunning effect, as they work their way into his imagination.... Finding out more about Urania and its inmates threads us back through his

creative landscape in new and exciting ways” (3). These biographers are well aware that they may make the wrong assumptions, that they can undermine the voices of their subjects; and they appreciate, as Adam Sisman commented in an interview for this study, that “the biographer should let the subject speak”. But nevertheless the biographer’s role is also to make connections between life, work and reading and to construct his or her version of the transformations in an author’s life that helped to make them who they were as people and writers.

John Halperin is a proponent of this middle or mixed position and in a useful overview argues that a biography of a writer is legitimately the “study of the relation ... of art to life .... [T]he connections between literature and the cultural moment at which it is composed, and by which it is moulded, are both inevitable and comprehensible, both ‘decidable’ and explainable .... Every creative act appears to me to have its origin in the confluence of the artist and the moment.... The critic’s job is, and always has been, to find out the author’s meaning” (155). Catherine Peters, on the other hand, sums up the view of modern critical theory as one of scorn for the idea that the text can be related to an author’s life in any useful or significant way. If we accept this, she argues, “literary biography must either be demoted to a pretentious variant of tabloid muck-raking; or become a work of art in its own right, with the question of objective truth to the facts of a subject’s life becoming secondary to the art of the biographer” (44). Recently Jonathan Culler has suggested that the “separation of the meaning of the text from the historical experience of the author retains considerable critical importance today. In a post-New Critical age it gives new interest to biographical criticism, which, in taking for granted the separation, can then work on the relation between the historical intentions of the authors and what their works actually achieve” (*Literary Theory* 225). One could argue, as do Wimsatt and Beardsley, that biography, which they call “a legitimate and attractive study in itself” (10), primarily looks to



the former and literary criticism to the later. Biographers have responded to this debate by becoming more aware of the difficulty of including literary criticism in biography, sometimes for non-theoretical reasons as well. John Haffenden suggests that

the heart of biography is fundamentally embarrassed by literary criticism. Too many biographers ... apprehend that any detailed, technical, loving and evaluative criticism will not hold the attention of the reader in the way that a good story does. (14)

Crick makes a helpful distinction by suggesting that, "How the books came to be written and published is the central theme of the biography of any writer, but not necessarily a full appreciation of the books themselves, seen as texts and symbolic structures" (34). And Arnold Rampersad, Ralph Ellison's biographer, argues that "biography is not literary criticism and cannot substitute for it" (3). His reasons take us back to the key debate about authorial autonomy and intention, as he believes that the presence of literary criticism in biography leads to the biographical fallacy; a biography could include literary criticism without perhaps making biographical inferences to inform our understanding of a text, but this seems extremely unlikely.

For literary biographers one way to understand a literary biographical subject and his or her experience is to focus on questions of authorship, rather than on analysis of finished works, and I would argue that this is how we could define the sorts of personal studies approved by Wimsatt and Beardsley. I will suggest that literary biographers see the nature of authorship as essential to the genre; a process which seeks to understand the transformations between what happens in a writer's life and their resulting work, even if it may not be possible to identify direct, very specific evidence to prove that this event gave rise to that story. Indeed, it is the very discontinuous, composite influences in a life that biography can interrogate. Whether the finished work realizes its author's (or authors') intentions is a separate matter. Wimsatt and Beardsley kill the author off in considering what the book is but

not in how it becomes what it is.

Stephen Greenblatt tackles the ‘death of the author’ debate in the context of New Historicism’s desire “to rub literary texts against the grain of received notions about their determinants” (*Practicing New Historicism* 52). On the one hand, he is absolutely clear in *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004), that his aim “is to discover the actual person who wrote the most important body of imaginative literature of the last thousand years ... to tread the shadowy paths that lead from the life he lived into the literature he created” (12). On the other hand, he believes that to “understand who Shakespeare was, it is important to follow the verbal traces he left behind back into the life he lived and into the world to which he was so open” (14). Another biographer of Shakespeare, Jonathan Bate, agrees because although we “must always be wary of attempts to map Shakespeare’s life on to his work .... writers cannot avoid drawing on their experience” (*Soul of the Age* 52). I will argue that the relationship and interplay between life and writing underpins a study of authorship in the literary biographies of Tomalin, Holmes and Lee, although their approaches are different.

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In the next three chapters, I shall trace how the issues discussed in this chapter are addressed in particular biographies by three contemporary biographers. A study of Claire Tomalin’s biographies will explore the extent to which she considers ‘truth’ as mediated and provisional; how she approaches autobiographical evidence; her use of anecdotes and chronology; and the use she makes of speculation. Richard Holmes is often associated with debates about identification in biography and the chapter devoted to him will explore the extent to which his approach can be seen as ‘Romantic’ in its treatment of the subject as an isolated individual, a great man or autonomous genius; the extent to which he places the

subject within the context of the social, political and cultural context of the historical period in which he lived; and his approach to historiography, influenced by the ontological and fictional focus important to Nadel and Munslow. Hermione Lee is a distinguished academic and her biographical writing responds to academic theory, New Historicism and Feminism in particular. I also suggest that Holmes and Lee understand the particular balance between fact and fiction and the nature of ontological and historical knowledge differently and I shall argue that this reflects their differing approaches to recent historiography.

## Chapter 3

### Claire Tomalin and Narrative in Biography

Claire Tomalin read English at Cambridge, graduating from Newnham College in 1954, and is now an Honorary Fellow of the college. She worked in publishing and journalism, becoming Literary Editor of the *New Statesman* and later the *Sunday Times* before devoting herself to writing full time in the late 1980s when she “became a writer” (*Several Strangers* 131). She has never held a university post, although she has honorary doctorates from the following universities: Cambridge, UEA, Birmingham, The Open University, Greenwich, Goldsmiths and Roehampton. This chapter is based on a study of six of her biographies, of Mary Wollstonecraft (1974), Katherine Mansfield (1987), Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens (1991), actress Dora Jordan (1995), Jane Austen (1998), Samuel Pepys (2003), and Thomas Hardy (2007).

The chapter will discuss how Tomalin addresses one of the main objections to biography: that biography seeks to present a single universal truth about coherent, knowable biographical subjects. It will also consider the extent to which she understands that biographers must base speculation on fact, not invention. It will look at how Tomalin approaches the use of autobiographical evidence and speculates when evidence is missing. It will consider how she applies the narrative strategies of fiction, such as the trope of embodiment, in her writing to represent aspects of her subjects’ character; how she manages narrative tension, dramatic effect and scene setting; the extent to which she highlights particular anecdotes, elucidating a particular point of view; and her simultaneous reliance on chronology and subtle subversions of the use of time. Michael Benton has already explored some of these issues and this chapter builds on aspects of his approach. For Benton biographies are “bound by the chronological imperative” (*Literary Biography* 19) although he suggests that Tomalin does subvert the use of time and uses narrative to create dramatic

effect. A final section in this chapter will explore how Tomalin looks at the connections between life and work in her subjects' and other writers' lives.

### **The Mediated Nature of Truth**

Biographers often recognise that the person they are writing about is struggling with a double consciousness that runs through their story, and that as a result the portrayal of a unified and fixed identity would be impossible. I will argue that Tomalin positively seeks out the conflicts and complexities that give rise to divided understandings of her subjects' lives, particularly the lives of women. At the beginning of her biography of Katherine Mansfield she comments that seen "through different eyes, her image trembles and blurs ... she transformed into multiple alternative versions to suit different moods, different friends, different facets of her personality" (5). At the end of her biography of Jane Austen, Tomalin decides to spell out and celebrate the different versions of Austen she has explored:

On the last page I must return to Jane Austen herself. To the child, for whom books were a refuge ... To the girl whose imagination took off in startling directions as she began to see the possibilities of telling stories of her own. To the energetic young woman who loved dancing and jokes, and dreamt of a husband even as she apprenticed herself to novel writing ... To the 25-year-old who decided she did not like people and could not write anymore; and who was tempted to make a comfortable, loveless marriage, and put the temptation behind her. To the loving sister and aunt who always had time for her family ... To the woman who befriended governesses and servants. To the published author in the glow of achievement and mastery of her art. To the dying woman with courage to resist death by writing in its very teeth. To the person who on occasion preferred to remain silent rather than cut across the views and habits of those she loved; and who kept notes of what people

said about her work, to read over to herself. This is my favourite image of Jane Austen, laughing at the opinions of the world (288).

Here and elsewhere in Tomalin's biographies an underlying gendered focus emphasizes the relationship between the public and private in men and women's lives. Austen as a woman is subject to the whims of her relatives, particularly her brothers, and has to mediate between a range of different expectations about how she should behave and live her life. Part of the fascination of the biography is how Tomalin's biographical subject manages the tensions and divisions between these different aspects of her life.

A passage in her biography of Samuel Pepys sums up an important component of Tomalin's vision for biography as a whole. She believes that his diary is "a demonstration of how impossible it is to make a tidy account of any one life. What we become most aware of is the bursting, disorganized, uncontrollable quality of his experience" (88). Tomalin considers that one "of the principal themes of the Diary is the classic conflict between his practical, sensible self and his romantic and erotic impulses, between prudence and order on the one hand and following free-ranging sexual impulses on the other" (205). This doubleness is reflected in both the public and private lives of Pepys, who "lets us know that each of us inhabits a perpetually fluctuating environment, and that we are changed, moved, and sometimes controlled by our inner tides and weather fronts even when we are most engaged in official functions" (xxxvii). Also, Tomalin emphasises two motivating factors, or what she calls "grit", for Pepys's diary:

One was his determination to prove himself ... The other grit was [his wife] Elizabeth, to whom he was bound emotionally and imaginatively. The tension between his day to day relations with 'my wife' and what he wrote down and kept secret from her is palpable; her presence or absence, her provocations and her anger,

are sown over and over again as touching his deepest self. The Diary could hardly have existed without his sense that he and Elizabeth were inextricably joined.

(xxxviii)

Other biographers – those with a keen interest in naval history, for example – would no doubt look elsewhere for evidence of Pepys’s professional character and success. Tomalin’s interest in the personal rather than the professional reflections in the diary highlights a theme throughout her major biographies: the importance of the private lives of all her subjects and of their personal relationships as constituent ingredients of their personality or character.

A double consciousness, a gendered perspective, and connections with women in the lives of her biographical subjects are preoccupations in Tomalin’s biographies of other male subjects. The authentic lives of these male subjects are understood in the context of, and through the doubleness that arises between, their professional lives and relationships with lovers, friends and family members, and at times Tomalin explores these different aspects of her subjects’ personalities where there are gaps and silences in their stories. She also sees the lives of women in the context of men who love them but keep them pigeon-holed, controlled and separate from their public life.

In her biographical account of the relationship between Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens, Tomalin considers the doubleness in Dickens’s life. When he first meets his alleged mistress, Nelly, “Once again Dickens appears in a double light: as the disinterested benefactor, eager to fulfil the ambition of an ambitious young woman [Nelly’s sister, Fanny], and as the bearer of dangerous gifts” (114) – that is, gifts which could damage the reputation of Nelly and her family. Even in the last year of his life, Dickens “continued to lead his double life and lay false trails” (194), as he tried to maintain his public and professional image as a gentleman. We know little about what Nelly Ternan thought and felt, but we know

a lot about Dickens. By seeing his life as part of hers in Tomalin's biography, we see her, or something of her. Dickens wanted to control her life, and that of others, and Tomalin tells us about his forceful personality throughout this biography: "he had the nerve, the practice and the strength of will of a man determined to have what he wanted" (183). But also for Tomalin this relationship represented far more than just the lives of two particular people:

Sometimes ... the telling of one particular story ... will resonate in a larger area. When I explored the relationship between Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens, it seemed to me I had stumbled on a story, fascinating in itself, that also illuminated a whole era and the assumptions made about relations between men and women of that era. (*Several Strangers* 131-32)

In her biography of Thomas Hardy, Tomalin is interested in the balances between Hardy's public and personal life and draws attention to the separation between Hardy's writing and married lives. Benton argues that the agenda in this biography "is promoted by Tomalin to suggest the prominence she intends to give both to Hardy's poetry and to his fascination with women in his life and writings" (21). Both Hardy's first wife, Emma, and his second, Florence, initially believed that they contributed to his work, only to be severely rebuffed when they strayed into his professional territory: "as Emma had once resented Hardy's failure to acknowledge her help and dedicate books to her, so Florence resented still more furiously his writing about Emma.... Having married the celebrated writer she at least expected to be celebrated as his muse. Instead she felt a humiliation from which she never recovered" (320). Hardy published work that neither of his wives had ever seen.

Tomalin detects doubleness and division throughout Hardy's life. In his teens, at sixteen, his "life was dividing into three quite separate strands. There was the office, where he was entering the professional world, which no member of his family had attempted to join



until now. There was, mostly inside his head, the world of books and scholarship ... There was home and family, and everything that went with them” (47). Hardy soon moves to London but if “he had come to London to escape from a divided life, he soon saw that he had failed” (74), because the rural poverty of his childhood and his background in a labouring class clashed with his expectations as a gentleman. This aspect of the doubleness in his life is explored in part in Tomalin’s study of his relationship with his first wife, Emma, who was middle-class: “This was the first time he had met one of her class and age on equal terms. Class mattered to them both” (100). Later, after they married and Hardy began publishing his novels, “there were two processes running counter to each other in this period. Hardy was achieving the sort of success he wanted ... At the same time he was feeling the pull of his old home, turning back to the places and people of the past.... And he was sometimes oppressed by the problems between Emma and himself” (183). He then goes on to even greater success with the publication of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude The Obscure* (1895) and these novels “were marked by a fierce questioning of accepted ideas about society and by a gloom that grew deeper from book to book. He sometimes denied that he was a pessimist, and it is true that he kept up his cheerful social life in London.... More than most writers he knew how to keep an absolute division, a closed and barred door between the polite and quietly spoken person ... and the raging, wounded inner self who chastised the values of the world he inhabited” (218). The paradox of Hardy’s life as a seemingly successful public man and husband who was in fact deeply ill at ease is an important theme in this biography. Tomalin’s point of view resonates with Holroyd’s perspective noted previously that “the art of life is the art of heroic paradox” (xii).

Julia Codell is interested in collaboration and authorship and focuses on Victorian biographies of artists written by members of the artist’s family. She argues that these biographies seek to reassure the world that their subject was a sociable and conventional

member of his or her class. They present the role of artist as composite, “its moral claims dependent on the artist’s fulfilment of familial and social roles” (102). This approach highlights the extent to which identity is made up of different performances, in particular those required of public and private identities of a subject. In other words, how each person behaves may vary depending on the situation they find themselves in; comparing our ‘performance’ at work family and friends may be surprised and see a different version of the person they thought they knew. The composite and multiple versions of Tomalin’s subjects are not only understood through their relationships and between their public and private roles, but also in the very ‘performance’ of their lives. “Katherine [Mansfield] was always a performer. She needed to enchant an audience” (14). So, too, Mary Wollstonecraft. Discussing Mary’s letters to her lover Gilbert Imlay, Tomalin ironically comments that “some characteristic Wollstonecraftiana put in its appearance early on: for example, Mary writes that ‘Life is but a labour of patience: it is always rolling a great stone up a hill; for, before a person can find a resting-place, imagining it is lodged, down it comes again, and all the work is to be done over anew’” (211). “Wollstonecraftiana” here means the performance of long rehearsed material. Dickens loved the theatre and often performed throughout his life, in his role as a public and professional man, as a father and husband, as a philanthropist and social reformer; it was hard to know who Dickens really was. He was also passionate about more obvious or literal forms of performance and as well as being a frequent theatregoer, he produced and directed many plays at home and amongst friends. In Nelly “he was now confronted with a real girl who could be seen as the embodiment of two of his themes. Nelly, her sisters and mother were all actresses; they inhabited the world of art and imagination, had the joyous freedom of manners that went with it, and for their pains they were slighted and despised by conventional people” (94). An interesting detail about the actress Dora Jordan’s story is that she was never ‘Dora Jordan’, her name was a lie all her adult life, and she was

certainly never Mrs Jordan, as she never married. Her name was Dorothy Bland, although as her mother was never legally married to her father, perhaps she should really be known after her mother, as Dorothy Phillips. Dora used her theatrical name on the stage of life and performed under it professionally and personally. In the case of Thomas Hardy, when he became very successful his “public persona was now secure. He remained hard to know. The poet in him was developing; the man avoided intimacy. None of his friends quite fathomed him.... Yet, although he resented intrusions into his privacy, he accepted a surprising number of visitors and allowed himself to be much painted, photographed and drawn” (282). In her biographies of Mansfield, Wollstonecraft, Hardy and Dickens Tomalin is interested in the extent to which it was so difficult to know what her subjects were really like as they paraded different aspects of their character depending on who they were with or where they were.

Through her understanding of these performances, which mask the complexities of their lives, Tomalin reveals how her subjects create myths about themselves; their private selves, as Tomalin says of Jane Austen, remain “as elusive as a cloud in the night sky. She has a way of sending biographers away feeling that ... she remains ‘as no doubt she would have wished – not an intimate but an acquaintance’. Her sharpness and refusal to suffer fools makes you fearful of intruding, misinterpreting, crassly misreading the evidence” (287). Tomalin’s Katherine Mansfield and Mary Wollstonecraft have egocentric personalities which draw them into unrealistic performances in their personal lives; Jane Austen has to perform the dutiful life of an impoverished gentlewoman and to live through an imagined life after the loss of Tom Lefroy; Dora, Nelly and Dickens perform on and off the stage; Hardy and Pepys write about their inner lives whilst conducting conventional and very successful public lives and struggling to come to terms with their relationship with women. These are not one-dimensional stories seeking a catch-all coherence, rather they are complex and composite portraits. By exploring the doubleness inherent in her subjects’ lives, their relationships, how

they moved through their public and private lives and performed to different audiences on the stage of life or the theatre, Tomalin creates portraits very far from the naive and reductive norm claimed by theoretical or academic critics of biography.

### **Use of Evidence**

In responding to criticisms of biography by the journalist Janet Malcolm, Tomalin writes that you “don’t have to be the slobbering voyeur Malcolm loves to conjure up to think that a more complete portrait of a human being is better than a less complete one” (*Several Strangers* 207). One of her problems in seeking a more complete portrayal is how to use autobiographical evidence.

Tomalin draws extensively on letters written by her subjects. Dora’s story, for example, is rich in letters which form the heart of the biography’s evidence: “Dora Jordan produced no autobiography, but we have something almost as good, at least for twenty five years of her life, and that is her letters” (xviii). An analysis of the notes for Tomalin’s biography of Katherine Mansfield – all her biographies include footnotes – shows that nearly fifty per cent of her sources come from autobiographical material, and two thirds are drawn from her own autobiographical material plus first person narratives written by others who knew her, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence in particular. Her biographies resound with the voices of her subjects.

In a chapter telling the story of Mary’s courtship with William Godwin, who became her husband and the father of Mary Godwin, the future wife of the poet Shelley, Tomalin uses autobiographical material, in particular their letters. Yet she is careful to draw our attention to their potential duplicity: “Neither of them was entirely reliable as a witness about the

sequence of events in their wooing” (258). Tomalin offers evidence from a letter by Mary to a friend to highlight one version of her feelings for Godwin:

The wound my unsuspecting heart formerly received is not healed. I found my evenings solitary, and I wished, while fulfilling the duty of a mother, to have some person with similar pursuits, bound to me by affection; and besides, I earnestly desired to resign a name which seemed to disgrace me. (269)

For Mary, becoming a married woman would relieve her loneliness and help remove the social stigma of using her previous lover’s surname. Tomalin then goes on to comment on Mary’s behaviour:

Probably her cool account of her motives in marrying represents the truth of one of her moods if not the whole truth. Godwin was clever and famous and sought after; she was fond of him, wanted a companion and bedmate, a father for Fanny; she had become pregnant by him; he was willing; it was enough. It is difficult at the best of times to write an explanation of one’s motives in marrying; if they have to be explained they almost inevitably sound inadequate, undignified or dishonest, or all three. (270)

In this passage we not only hear how the biographer has assessed Mary’s motives, recognising that she cannot access the “whole truth” but we also hear her voice more directly, as she uses autobiographical material from Wollstonecraft to reflect on broader questions about any decision to marry. Tomalin draws out the complexities of her subject in similar ways throughout her biography, and she also ponders the complexity of autobiographical evidence, as we come to know different aspects of Wollstonecraft’s personality. In her youth Mary ran a school with her two sisters and during this period she wrote a manual on education, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786): “A striking omission from her

book, as from her letters, was any mention of her own pupils. There were plenty of personal references, but they were almost all to herself. She could never write without inserting more or less veiled remarks about her own emotional state” (58). Tomalin argues that during the closing stages of her affair with Gilbert Imlay, Mary’s letters show that she “could not bear to acknowledge that she had been wrong about him. It was impossible for her to accept that he was simply not interested in her sorrows” (222). Tomalin does not say that she is confident about what Mary Wollstonecraft actually thought and felt, but by looking closely at autobiographical evidence and making connections between what happened in her life and what she reveals in her letters we read a portrayal of a flawed, at times self-centred and complex character that seems authentic. The letters are not read naively, or at face value.

Tomalin also reflects on the reliability of the correspondence between Katherine Mansfield and her husband John Middleton Murry, when Katherine was in Europe because of ill health: “Sad as it is to read their plans for an impossible future, it is worse to eavesdrop on their mutual flattery, which becomes part of the fantasy, about their future life together” (167). The letters show how they tried to bolster each other’s confidence, but perhaps also delude each other about their place in the world.

Commenting on Katherine Mansfield’s journal and notebook entries, Tomalin notes “that she made up wild stories to impress, including one of rape and pregnancy. Since these themes crop up in her early notebooks, the obvious thought is that she was trying out her plots on her friends, as well as enjoying shocking them. Katherine told lies all her life, but usually more for effect than advantage” (24). This is a key theme of Tomalin’s biography: Katherine was “a liar all her life – there is no getting around this – and her lies went quite beyond conventional social lying” (57): as Mansfield was “the heroine of her own life story; lies became not lies but fiction, a perfectly respectable thing” (57). Lies may be appropriate for fiction, but Tomalin is alert to their use in the autobiographical material of her subjects.

Tomalin has on occasions drawn our attention to one particular autobiographical document that seemed to be pivotal in the life of her subject. One of the most important letters Dora ever wrote, according to Tomalin, gives expression to the core division in her life: “her pride in what she had achieved in her profession and her acknowledgement of the price she and her family had to pay for it.... It is a statement that sounds like the exact truth: she is equally distressed at her separation from her family and proud of her achievement in the theatre” (228/9). In a letter to her son George, written two years before her death, Dora wrote: ““I begin to feel that acting keeps me alive ... in fact it keeps me from thinking”” (293). Tomalin draws our attention to the nature of autobiographical truth here and her use of words is interesting. A ‘statement’ implies something that is fixed and closed, rather than open-ended, and ‘sounds like the exact truth’ draws our attention to Tomalin’s rare suggestion that this letter gives an accurate, unmediated picture of what Dora actually thought. In this case, what she thought was that her desires were neither single nor coherent. In her biography of Jane Austen, Tomalin dedicates a chapter to the earliest of Austen’s letters to survive, to her sister Cassandra, wishing her happy birthday. At this time, Austen dreamed of love and marriage. As Tomalin makes us aware, it is “the only surviving letter in which Jane is clearly writing as the heroine of her own youthful story, living for herself the short period of power, excitement and adventure that might come to a young woman when she is thinking of choosing a husband; just for a brief time she is enacting instead of imagining” (119). This letter was written in the mid 1790s when Austen was writing the reworked drafts of novels that went on to become *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Northanger Abbey* (1818); it was a pivotal period in her career as a novelist. But the letter is important for another reason. Very few of her letters survive, only 160 for her whole life and 28 for a prolific period in her writing career, 1796-1801. As a result, comments Tomalin, her biography is “not an easy story to investigate. She herself

wrote no autobiographical notes, and if she kept any diaries they did not survive her” (4). Many of her letters were destroyed by Cassandra and the problem for a biographer is that this “leaves the impression that her sister was dedicated to trivia.... You have to keep reminding yourself how little they represent of her real life, how much they are an edited and contrived version. What is left is mostly her attempt to entertain Cass ... She leaves out the empty spaces, the moments of solitude and imagination, the time spent thinking, dreaming and writing” (124). Tomalin is aware that what “you do pick up from the letters of the 1790s is the sisters’ great reliance on one another for information and understanding that could not be expected from anyone else” (124). The nature of the autobiographical evidence discussed here emphasises not only the biographer’s recognition of gaps and silences but also the role of relationships in her subjects’ lives, in assessing both what has survived and what has not survived.

### **Speculation About Her Subjects**

Tomalin is very aware that the truth in letters, and other autobiographical material, is mediated as her subjects create an image for themselves that they want others to believe, or when they know that their letters could become public documents and she speculates about why this may have been the case. Tomlin responds directly to one of Dora Jordan’s letters when she writes of her desertion by the Duke of Clarence, who had been her lover for many years. As an heir to the throne he was under pressure to leave her. In the letter, Dora writes that he ““has done no wrong, and he is suffering for it. But as far as he has left it in his own power, he is doing everything kind and noble, even to distressing himself”” (247). Tomalin then comments: “whose power was he in, if the royal family was so much engaged on her behalf?” (247), when Dora is faced with being cut off without adequate support because her lover as a future king needed to find a wife and greater respectability. Of the letter as a whole,



Tomalin comments: “Dora was reluctant to find a villain and unable to suspect she was being lied to by the highest in the land in order to keep her quiet. Was there no one to tell the Duke to his face that his behaviour was that of a monster? Apparently not” (247). At the end of her life, an outcast living in France where she had fled from her creditors, Dora tried to make the best of her situation in her letters to her children. For Tomalin, these letters of Dora’s were a lifeline – less a record of reality than a means of coping with it. In her last surviving letter she expresses confidence that ““We shall all meet again, and I trust be very happy”” (296), although since her separation from their father, Dora had rarely seen her children and must have known that she was unlikely to do so again. By drawing attention to this sentence Tomalin makes the reader aware of Dora’s role as a mother, keen to reassure her children, whilst at the same time highlighting the irony of the loneliness and sadness at the end of her life.

When the direct voices of her subjects are not available Tomalin turns to autobiographical evidence written by those who were close to them. In the case of Dora Jordan, who cannot always express her true feelings in her letters, Tomalin draws our attention to those written by her sons. Henry writes to his sibling George about his father’s desertion of their mother which he only learns about from a newspaper story shown to him by a friend, and Tomalin is moved by his anger on his mother’s behalf: “When I opened the crumbled edges and began to read, the clear, true voice of Henry’s outraged grief brought him to life before me with all the force he put into the writing, and I found I had tears in my eyes as I read” (251). Tomalin is keen not to put words into the mouths of her subjects but one way she makes us aware of her point of view is when she mentions a particular piece of evidence, and then makes connections between this factual material and what happened next, leaving us to draw our own inferences. On the day of Dora’s funeral “13 July 1816 – the Duke wrote to Henry [stationed thousands of miles away in India], from Bushy as though

nothing had happened.... Henry must have received his father's letter round about Christmas 1816, along with the one from Barton informing him of his mother's death. We don't know what he thought" (305) and Tomlain does not make any suggestions. But then she immediately goes on to discuss Henry's health, drawing the reader's attention to the sudden deterioration in his physical health which leads quickly to his death. It is of course not possible to know if Henry died of a broken heart and his health may well have been compromised already. But Tomalin is describing one version of what may have happened so soon after Henry hears about the death of his mother and his father's casual denial: "There was not much joy in Henry's life. After the news of his mother's death reached him, his health began to give cause for alarm; and before he was due to start the long journey home from Madras, before he could even visit George [his brother], he became ill. Four days the fever raged in him; and after four days he died." (306/7). We do not know what Henry thought but Tomalin's view is clear. At the end of the biography Tomalin speculates and is explicit in her point of view:

A woman who should have been honoured and supported, surrounded by family, comforted in her illness, was instead first driven out of her home, then separated from the sons who were her natural protectors, and divided from her young daughters, who were encouraged to forget about her while she lived.... No-one lifted a finger to help her in practical matters; no one spoke for her in her isolation and illness (304).

This is a poignant, moving and partisan passage and in this instance the biographer's even handedness is compromised. Tomalin's empathy with her biographical subject is clear and out in the open as she draws attention to the patriarchal denials which resulted in Jordan's lonely death.

Tomalin's biography of Thomas Hardy raises speculative problems. Her footnotes indicate that only 10.5% of her material was taken from Hardy's letters. Again vital letters are missing, some destroyed by Hardy's unhappy first wife, Emma, as their marriage soured, others by Hardy himself, as he sought to control his reputation by writing a misleading memoir and then destroying the original evidence from his letters, notebooks and journals. Thomas Hardy's memoirs, allegedly written by his second wife, Florence, comprise 12% of the sources identified in her biography of his life. Tomalin is cautious when using suspect autobiographical material from ancillary figures from her subjects' lives. Mansfield's husband, Middleton Murry, was criticised after her death for making money by publishing her work and writing books about her life, eulogising her as an iconic literary figure. In her biography Tomalin only mentions this material in 3% of the evidence she cites in the biography's notes. In her biography of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens, we have no autobiographical evidence at all from Nelly, Dickens' alleged lover. Tomalin never fails to make clear what evidence is missing, as well as when she is speculating. In this, her work challenges critical views such as Benton's argument that continuity in biography "is subverted by the inevitable gaps in the histoire" (24) and Linda Leavell's proposition that, as well as seeking facts and information, many "read biography for a coherent story", a propensity that encourages biographical speculation:

The biographer who first showed me that this is as true of good biography as it is of good fiction is Claire Tomalin. Unlike lesser biographers, she neither qualifies her conjectures with sheepish *probablys* and *might haves*, nor does she brazenly present hypothesis as fact. Rather, she engages the reader in the process of speculation. (81)

Tomalin certainly does engage in speculation, but as already noted, she is not looking for a one size fits all representation of her subjects, and at times she does rely on probablys and maybes. For example, when Mary Wollstonecraft went to live with her publisher Joseph

Johnson, “probably she was awkward about how their association might be interpreted and he may have wanted to reassure her that his intentions were businesslike” (93) and “it seems at least likely” (96) that Johnson was homosexual although there “is no direct evidence” (97). When Jane Austen was sent away to school with Cassandra at seven years old, it “was Austen’s second banishment from home” (35). This assertion is followed by speculation: the “very wretchedness may also have done something for her” (38), as reading became a retreat; given that “Other people’s worlds offer an escape.... her own imagination may have offered her another escape route” (38); so the school “may claim some indirect credit for Jane Austen’s mental and imaginative development” (39). In relating the facts and describing events Tomalin does not present hypotheses as facts but makes it clear when she is offering her version. The use of words like “may” or “probably” is hardly “sheepish”.

A description rooted entirely in speculation takes place in her biography of Katherine Mansfield when Tomalin describes why she thinks Katherine’s miscarriage and love affair with Floryan Sobieniowski changed her life: “without an understanding of what happened to her in 1909, the rest of her life simply does not make sense” (70). Tomalin is alert to accusations of invention: “In a work of fiction, the part played by Floryan in Katherine’s life would appear so extraordinary and melodramatic that one might shrug it off as improbable. In a biography, the problem is one of documentation; it is not possible to prove every detail of the story I propose to trace, but it does fit all the facts we know, and has an inner logic which makes sense of everything that happened subsequently in the lives of both Katherine and Floryan” (71). The crucial speculation concerns whether Katherine knew that she had been infected by gonorrhea? Tomalin uses a simple direct statement to make her position clear: “My own view is that she must have suspected something” (78). Another example of speculation is in her biography of Thomas Hardy when she notes that despite the importance of his poems about his first wife, Emma, Hardy does not write about their wedding or

honeymoon: “Whether both of them, having defied their parents, had regretful thoughts for them on the day, and whether lovemaking, at last licensed, was awkward for them, as for most newly married innocents, we shall never know, but there were many possible reasons for them to feel unsure of themselves” (142). In teasing out the different ‘visions’ of each subject Tomalin speculates, but does not invent.

### **Narrative Strategies**

Tomalin’s style of writing can go a long way to clarify her view of events when she lacks concrete evidence. The quality of her writing bears out Benton’s distinction between “the *histoire*, the chain of events, the people and their settings, and the *recit*, the discourse that gives them expression” (19). This section will consider the narrative strategies in Tomalin’s writing, including the use she makes of physical descriptions of her subjects; how she manages narrative tension for dramatic effect; her scene setting; the extent to which she highlights particular anecdotes; and her simultaneous reliance on chronology, and subversion of the rules of time.

Tomalin is primarily interested in the appearance of her subjects as representative of their experience and relationships with others. Appearance and physical attraction are significant only as one aspect of the evidence which embodies a sense of who her subjects were as people. In the case of Jane Austen, Tomalin devotes a short four page chapter to Austen’s appearance, which reinforces themes about the composite nature and elusiveness of her subject. Tomalin notes that “there is no such thing as a reliable description or portrait” (110), just as there is no one way to describe who Austen was as a person. Tomalin notes that Austen was not really interested in how she looked: “the impression we get is that, had she lived two hundred years later, she would have rejoiced in the freedom of a pair of old trousers, with a tweed skirt for church, and one decent dress kept for evening” (113). Tomalin

concludes, as much from what was not said about her appearance as what was, that Austen “was not a beauty, but attractive to those who knew her best and responded to the animation, responsiveness and intelligence of her expression. And of course, like most people, she had looks that changed” (113). Tomalin offers us a version of a rather frumpy Jane, attractive because of her nature but at other times rather alarming. The biography here is keen to remind the reader that Austen was not interested in her own appearance and that without any reliable painting or drawing our understanding of her cannot be based on any reliable evidence about how she looked. In this context Tomalin opens this chapter with the larger point that “Biographers soon learn that there is no such thing as a reliable description or portrait” (110). Biography has been described as a type of portrait or painting but this seems to me to be misleading and is contrary to Tomalin’s perspective here, which suggests that we can look at the different versions of a biographical subject but can never identify a fixed and stable representation. And anyway, paintings or photographers offer a portrayal fixed at a particular moment of time whilst biography has a much wider reach across many moments.

In her biography of Dora Jordan, most certainly physically beautiful, Tomalin begins and ends her story with the statue that her lover, the future King, commissioned following her death. This encourages a reading of Jordan as a possession, an iconic image to be observed, lusted after, not a fellow human being, to love and care for: “her pose, in its simplicity and tenderness, makes one think less of an actress or muse than of a renaissance Madonna” (3). The fate of the statue embodies the way that the royal family sought to hide the truth about Dora’s life away from public view. Tomalin emphasises that the statue, referred to as a woman rather than an object, “made her first public appearance, more than one hundred and twenty years after she was sculpted, in 1956” (320). As a writer interested in feminist issues Tomalin uses embodiment as a narrative tool; Austen’s physical image and body are as

elusive as her true self, and Dora is on a pedestal, an object of pleasure for the Duke of Clarence in death, as in life.

Benton argues that Tomalin is good at scene setting: “it is the emotional colouring and vivid recreation that they bring which lifts the life off the page and into the reader’s imagination” (24). At times Tomalin interjects a more lyrical passage shifting the tone and pace of her story. In the following example, which reflects interesting features of the economic and social conventions of the period, she conjures up Austen’s happy and idyllic childhood with her parents and with the fee-paying school boys who shared her home and were taught by her father:

Bread was baked, and beer was brewed at home and stored down in the cellars; the parsonage had its own cows to be milked, and the cream churned by the dairy maid for their butter. The washerwoman came once a month to tackle the piles of dirty linen, disrupting everything with steam and suds. In June there was haymaking, when the children were supplied with small hayrakes; in July there was boiling of jams and jellies; in August the harvest; in September you heard shooting. (30/31)

In a second example she connects Austen’s birth and death to the seasons. Before she is born,

The November days went by and the rains set in, keeping the boys indoors; by the end of the month it was dark in the house at three in the afternoon, and dinner had to be eaten very promptly if they were to do without candles. Still no baby appeared. December came, bringing an epidemic of colds and feverish complaints. There was a sharp frost, putting ice on the ponds, enough for the boys to go sliding; then, on the 16<sup>th</sup>, [Gilbert] White noted, ‘Fog, sun, sweet day.’/The 16<sup>th</sup> December was the day of Jane Austen’s birth. (1)

On her birth comes the sun – a lyrical moment, though one carefully backed up by contemporary record. On the day that baby Jane left the house with her mother and family to

be christened at the local church, Tomalin writes that “after a harsh, dark morning, the sun came out. Little Jane was well wrapped in shawls ... and the family processed up the lane to the church” (4). As her life draws to a close, Tomlin comments that 15 July “was very rainy” (271), then Jane rallied round and on 17 July “the sun shone all day until the evening, but when rain set in for the night” (272), Jane died. Cassandra wrote of her sorrow because Jane ““was the sun of my life”” (274). In both of these examples, Tomalin draws in the reader as we almost smell the baking bread, hear the bubbling of the suds in the washing tub and the distant shooting, and feel the warmth of the sun. On the one hand Tomalin is offering evocative storytelling here for her general readers, but on the other she is in danger of moving too far away from a description of the evidence, conjuring up romanticized versions of Austen and her childhood.

In another example, Tomalin opens her biography of Wollstonecraft with a description of her birthplace, seen even at the time of writing as home to the troubled, transient and rootless:

At the ragged eastern edge of the City of London is a district known as Spitalfields. Today it is very sparsely peopled; wave after wave of immigrants has come and gone, leaving a few sad Indian faces on the streets and a floating population of tramps who build bonfires at the deserted corners on winter Sundays.... Spitalfields has never been a particularly happy or prosperous place. (11)

Tomalin dramatically describes Wollstonecraft’s attempt at suicide from Putney Bridge, when it became clear to her that her lover Gilbert Imlay had rejected her. Tomalin’s style, which some may find romanticised, emphasises the episode’s pathos. Again the weather helps set the scene:

She had money in her pocket, and approached a boatman.... By now it was raining harder than ever. She beached her boat on the bank under the old wooden bridge and



decided to go up to it, high above the water ... It was a busy bridge, but she dodged from bay to bay in the darkness until she felt her clothes were completely soaked in the rain. Then she climbed on to the railing, a flimsy structure of two wooden bars ... and jumped. (235)

These passages are evocative and conjure up quite clear visual images for the benefit of the reader, but they run the risk of being labelled as fictional. If it is correct to assume that Tomalin could provide evidence for the factual assertions in these passages, drawn from historical contextual material and autobiographical evidence, then one could make the case that they are rhetorical but not invented. The perspective of Kenneth Silverman is important here: biography “aims not merely at informing but also at moving the reader, through the spectacle of another soul’s journey through existence. The art of biography consists of producing affecting narrative while remaining utterly faithful to the documents” (*Common-Place* Part III). Tomalin provides footnotes about Spitalfields and evidence for Mary’s suicide is drawn from Godwin’s memoir, based on Mary’s perhaps somewhat romanticised autobiographical account. Tomalin has described how she believes that the biographer’s imagination is important in evoking these kinds of scenes:

Biography has become my province, and I have never attempted fiction, although I have come to think the gap between biography and fiction is not so great. Novelists and biographers are both excited and inspired by the patterns of human activity. They are both story tellers. Both use the basic raw materials of life, birth and childhood, work and love, family structures, betrayal, woe and death. You need imagination even if you don’t invent, and writers who invent very often depend on research too, their own or someone else’s. (*Several Strangers* 131/132)

Still passages like these open Tomalin to accusations of invention, especially from readers who ignore endnotes, or come to them belatedly and from those who would challenge the

biographers' use of autobiographical material; the idea that Wollstonecraft would have dodged about until she was soaked with rain does seem somewhat melodramatic and hard to believe. And this suggests another perspective about Tomalin's style here; we should not miss the irony in her tone as she seems perhaps less than sympathetic to Wollstonecraft's desperation. In an example already cited, describing her book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786), Tomalin comments wryly that a "striking omission from her book, as from her letters, was any mention of her own pupils.... She could never write without inserting more or less veiled remarks of her own emotional state" (58). Similarly, when describing Wollstonecraft's attempts to support Ann, a small orphan girl who behaved in a way that Wollstonecraft did not like, Tomalin comments wryly that the girl "was a victim of Mary's egocentric imagination. Those who came into her power and could not play the roles she had planned for them were not let off lightly" (108). The point here is not that Tomalin invents her evidence but that at times her style and tone promotes good storytelling and her particular version of one aspect of her subject's life.

In her more recent biographies of male writers Tomalin is more circumspect in her writing style; lyrical, somewhat romanticized passages are avoided, perhaps in response to criticisms about invention in the form, although as a later chapter explores, she is only rarely criticised for her storytelling abilities. Benton emphasizes the importance of openings in biographies and in the case of both Tomalin's Pepys and Hardy these emphasise a key theme, the subject's relationship with his wife or wives and the connection this has with his life as a writer. Tomlain opens her biography of Pepys with a scene between himself and his wife, Elizabeth: "At seven o'clock on a January morning, as the sky over London was growing light, a row broke out in a bedroom between a husband and wife" (xxxiii). Elizabeth has written a letter to explain how lonely she is, she and Pepys argue, and Pepys destroys some of their personal papers including letters: "To both husband and wife the written word was of

great importance. Both were readers, and destruction of written evidence of their love and its history was a symbolic act” (xxxv). In the case of Hardy, the biography opens as follows:

In November of 1912 an ageing writer lost his wife. He was not expecting her to die, but then he had not taken much notice of her for some time.... At about eight in the morning on 27 November her young maid Dolly went to her as usual and found her alarmingly changed since bedtime the night before ... He spoke her name: ‘Em, Em – don’t you know me?’ But she was already unconscious, and within minutes she had stopped breathing. Emma Hardy was dead. This is the moment when Thomas Hardy became a great poet....it was the death of Emma that proved to be his best inspiration. (xvii)

The anecdotes that Tomalin chooses to highlight also tell us about her point of view. In her biography of Katherine Mansfield she is very explicit that Mansfield’s life turned on several key moments or events and two in particular seem pivotal. Finding out that Katherine is pregnant, her mother whisks her off to Europe and then abandons her to have her baby alone. She has a miscarriage and then goes on to meet another man, Floryan Sobieniowski, who, as previously mentioned, Tomlin suggests infected her with gonorrhoea, a disease which Tomalin speculates contributed to her early death:

It could even be said that her story hinges on a single physical fact. By becoming pregnant during the first months of her passionately sought freedom in London, she set in motion a sequence of events which ran to her death fourteen years later, events which darkened her relations with her family most unfortunately; which profoundly affected both her marriages; which involved her reputation as a writer; and which destroyed the foundations of her bodily health. (7)

Similarly, when Katherine met her first publisher to discuss the publication of her first story,

he picked out ... 'The Child-Who-Was-Tired'. The dilemma for Katherine was acute. When he singled it out, she should obviously have said at once, 'That one was actually a version of the work of another writer – the Russian writer, Chekhov.' Yet this would inevitably spoil the moment of triumph, and perhaps cast a doubt over the authenticity of the rest of the stories. She said nothing. The moment passed, and could not be recalled. (80)

Here Tomalin is interested in both the act of plagiarism by Mansfield and in speculating about her subject's motives and what they can tell us about who she was as a person. This is not literary criticism or the biographical fallacy but a focus by the biographer on how key moments in her subject's material life not only influenced but transformed her writing life.

Tomalin takes a thematic approach at times to her subjects' lives, while retaining chronology. Among the chapter headings in her biography of Mary Wollstonecraft are: 'Drury Lane', 'Admirers', 'Scandal'. In her biography of Hardy, the chronology of his life is partly marked out for the reader in terms of key "phases". As a boy "a new phase of his life started when ... he set off alone on the three-mile walk to school in Greyhound Yard in the centre of Dorchester" (31). Hardy as a young man moves to London: "Now he was shaking off mother, home, all the web of experiences and associations that had formed him and also cramped him in the country. It was a brave move" (62). In March 1870, Hardy "set off on what proved to be the most momentous journey of his life" (98), when he meets Emma. In 1871 Hardy became a full time writer: "This was the turning point in his professional life. He had made the leap into being a full time writer ... it was a great moment" (121). Benton suggests that one of the reasons why this signposting of pivotal moments in Hardy's life is significant is because it shows the two timelines in literary biography, that of the life and of the creation of the works: "The 'life narrative' covers a longer period and flows at a different pace from the 'literary narrative'. Biography may flatten life into a steady procession of dates

and events; or it may capture the way time is experienced by the subject and everyone else – that odd mixture of continuity and stillness, anticipation and memory, routine and surprise, a mixture that is likely to be particularly significant in the life of a poet or novelist” (29). Benton goes on to say that “the handling of time in biography would seem to be much more straightforward than in fiction; the chronology of the subject’s life is, after all, a given” (43), although in Tomalin’s work it is less straightforward than it might seem at a cursory reading. It is very difficult to write about all the different strands of a life that run alongside each other, particularly as they will move at different paces, and have their own key moments. Whilst Tomalin does use a broadly chronological approach to her subjects’ lives she is certainly interested in the relationship between a ‘life narrative’ and a ‘literary narrative’ and one of the themes in her work as a whole is the relationship between her subjects’ professional and private lives, particularly when the chronology of different strands of a life is not a given, and can be difficult to unravel.

Tomalin structures her biography of Austen chronologically for the most part but the existing evidence or lack of it does not allow for a steady chronological approach. After six chapters drawing together evidence from Austen’s early life, three chapters discuss the social world in which she lived: ‘Weddings and Funerals’, ‘Neighbours’ and ‘Dancing’. The next two chapters consider her appearance and one particular letter written in her youth to her sister, Cassandra. This chapter serves to mark the end of Austen’s life before she began writing, and the next four chapters, Chapters Twelve to Fifteen, focus on her life and writing over four important years, 1795 – 1799, years during which she wrote the first drafts of three novels which would either not be published until many years later, or until after her death. Chapter Twelve opens with a turning point, her brief love affair in 1795 with Tom Lefroy who was sent away by his family as soon as his entanglement with a penniless girl became clear:

A small experience, perhaps, but a painful one for Jane, this brush with Tom Lefroy. What she distilled from it was something else again. From now on she carried in her own flesh and blood ... the knowledge of sexual vulnerability ... to hope, and to feel the blood warm; to wince, to withdraw; too long for what you are not going to have and had better not mention. Her writing becomes informed by this knowledge, running like a dark undercurrent beneath the comedy. Writing is what she increasingly turned to now. (122)

So, “in four years three major novels were underway; and she is not yet twenty-four” (123). Chapter Sixteen is called ‘Twenty Five’, when Austen, with three unpublished manuscripts under her belt, stops writing: “Instead, she fell silent. For ten years she produced almost nothing” (169). In this period she also moved away from her beloved childhood home, Steventon, to Bath, where she was unhappy. The next ten years of her life are covered in three chapters and only thirty-three pages. Then in 1809 Jane, her mother and sister move to Chawton and she takes up her pen again to write *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816) and *Persuasion* (1818), and her life as a published author begins in 1811. Austen died only six years later in 1817.

In Tomalin’s biography, Austen’s ‘life narrative’ and ‘literary narrative’ interweave in a complex pattern. For Tomalin, the points of direct connection between these two lives relate to Austen’s need for a particular writing environment, something which Tomalin feels Mansfield also never found:

through her writing, she was developing a world of imagination in which she controlled everything that happened. What she depended on was particular working conditions which allowed her to abstract herself from the daily life going on around

her; and these she lost just after her twenty-fifth birthday. What made her fall silent was another huge event in her 'life of no event': another exile. (170)

Tomalin thus appears to follow what critic Clare Harman calls the "most persistent theory about Austen's creative life ... that she had two 'phases' of composition in the 1790s and after 1809, which were divided by eight years of dearth, that the family move to Bath in 1801 silenced her and that her muse returned only when she settled back in Hampshire" (42). Harman repudiates this theory, providing evidence that while in Bath Austen sold her manuscript for *Lady Susan* in 1803, and that she started work on a new novel, *The Watsons*. Harman suggests that while Bath clearly was a "time of retrenchment and change, Austen was unlikely to have given up her habit of writing in these years: it's as unlikely as her not having written any letters in the same period. We just don't have the documentation anymore" (45). In her view, in relation to the manuscripts of two of Austen's early novels written before the move to Bath, she "must have been working on both of them in the years 1805-10" (49). Tomalin acknowledges that Austen sold her manuscript of *Lady Susan* and that she began to write a new novel during these years in Bath. But she understands both of these experiences as difficult for Austen. *Lady Susan* was not published until after her death, although an early manuscript was sold to a publisher in 1803 but not published; Tomalin comments that this sale was worse than an earlier refusal of the novel: "this time Jane's hopes had been raised by an acceptance" (185). Tomalin later in the biography makes it clear that Austen tried to chase the publisher, but to no avail. Her new novel, *The Watsons*, was started during the Bath period, but Austen abandoned it after the death of her father in 1805. Tomalin also notes how much care Austen must have taken with the manuscripts of her other completed but unpublished novels: "Keeping them under her eye must have been one of the unmentioned but essential disciplines of her life" (185). This reading of Tomalin's approach is another example of her integrity in the use of evidence, as she explores the relationship

between Austen's everyday and writing lives. It is in many ways a question of balance between Tomalin's and Harman's analysis, given that Austen was clearly writing during her time in Bath. By noting her care of her manuscripts and events in her life which prevented the publication or completion of other novels, Tomalin's biography suggests that a 'literary narrative' needs to acknowledge that a writer will have periods when they form pages of text, and times when they do not, but, nevertheless, they live their lives very conscious of themselves as writers, the act of writing itself ebbing and flowing through their everyday existence.

### **Connecting Life and Work**

So far this chapter has identified aspects of Tomalin's writing which run through most of her books, but not all aspects do. For example, in her later writing she has left herself open to accusations of the biographical fallacy. The view of critics about this aspect of her approach is discussed in a later chapter, but here I will explore some of the nuances in her writing. In her first biography, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1974), Tomalin is interested in the connection between her subject and other women writers. Women writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century often resisted the challenge set by Wollstonecraft and another contemporary writer, Mary Hays: "the steady campaign of denigration from women writers, who might have seen their own interest in supporting the Marys, is harder to explain. Of those women who took it upon themselves to lay down standards for their own sex, one after another approached the question of women's rights, examined its various aspects, and retreated with expressions of disapproval or contempt" (301). Tomalin argues that it was not until the twentieth century that other women, like Mansfield, took up the challenge Mary Wollstonecraft had set: "women with Mary's breadth and experience and outspokenness were lacking in England throughout the hundred years that followed her death. She had presented



an ideal, but it had been turned almost at once into a bogey, flanked by the spectres of revolution, irreligion and sexual anarchy” (314). Mary “spoke up ... for what had been until then a largely silent section of the human race” (319).

In her biography of Katherine Mansfield, Tomalin tells the story of her subject’s life, with limited commentary on her work. She seems clear that she is not engaged in a critical study and her aim in the opening of the biography indicates that she is primarily interested in the connections between Mansfield’s material and writing lives rather than her works:

I began to think that there might be something else to say about Katherine Mansfield ... a different perspective from which to view her.... [Other biographers] seem to me to have underestimated the importance of certain aspects of her life, in particular the chain of events leading from her first foray into sexual freedom in 1908, and the various long-term results of her association with Floryan Sobieniowski in 1909. I felt her medical history required more careful study, and the result of this has been a reinterpretation of certain key questions in her life (1).

This illustrates Tomalin’s interest in Mansfield’s life and the connection this has with her writing, rather than with literary criticism of her individual stories.

In her biography Tomalin will at times mention one particular story or anecdote to emphasise connections between events in Mansfield’s life, aspects of her personality and what may have been on her mind at the time she was writing. For example: in relation to her early story “The Garden Party” she comments that this “story is plainly not autobiographical, but the fluctuation between cold hostility to the family and warm enjoyment of some aspects of its luxurious way of life was part of Katherine’s experience in 1907” (32); Tomalin comments that in reading “A Birthday” “you know at once that this is the work of a real writer who has hit an inspired vein. Yet there is a feeling of randomness about the achievement too.... In her writing, as in her life, she reveled in change, disguise, mystery and

mimicry ... lacking stamina, she dispersed herself too widely in different effects” (89); and in another comment which reflects on why Mansfield wrote short stories, Tomalin argues that another story “ “Prelude” was amongst her finest stories ... [and] it is boldly original. The lack of stamina which prevented her from producing a novel encouraged other virtues: speed, economy, clarity. They became her hallmark, admired and imitated by later writers” (162); and finally, towards the end of her life, the “stories that Katherine were writing now were little concerned with love except in its negative aspects” (220), at a time when her marriage with Murry had proved a disappointment and, apart from the adulation of her friend and companion, Ida, she had no-one else close to her. These are examples of general connections made by Tomalin between her subject’s life and her life as a writer and they show her ‘life narrative’ and ‘literary narrative’ working together.

There are two examples in the Mansfield biography where Tomalin draws attention to more specific connections between life and work. Tomalin writes fairly briefly about Mansfield’s relationship with a friend in her youth, Edith Bendall, about whom she may have written a very short story, “Leves Amores”, “which is undisguisedly lesbian” (37). Tomalin speculates that “Katherine does not appear to have written about her love for Edith Bendall beyond the journal entries, but it may have made its way into English fiction by a circuitous route” (37). What is particularly interesting is that the story is reproduced in an appendix to the biography. Tomalin’s decision to reprint the story certainly indicates that she sees a connection between Mansfield’s sexuality and her writing life. But she is tactful and unspecific in making these connections. The other appendix in the biography is a reproduction of correspondence in *The Times Literary Supplement*, after Mansfield’s death, about her alleged plagiarism of the Chekhov story, “Spat’ khochetsia”, also known as “Sleepy”, a title and story similar to Mansfield’s “The-Child-Who-Was-Tired”. The focus here is on what Mansfield may or may not have intended in her use of Chekhov’s story. As

with her references to “Leves Amores”, Tomalin is not writing literary criticism by writing about Mansfield’s narrative content, style and form, but making connections and drawing attention to a pivotal moment in Mansfield’s writing life.

However, there are a few examples in the biography when Tomalin is tempted into the biographical fallacy: when discussing her relationship with her lover, Floryan Sobieniowski, she suggests that “A story of Katherine’s written about this time, ‘The Swing of the Pendulum’, may build up the picture a little further” (73) about her relationship with him and why she became ill; in another example, she describes the content for an incomplete autobiographical novel in which the heroine is “obviously based on herself” (119) and another female character, based on her friend Ida, expresses obsessive love for her. But Tomalin wonders whether “Ida would have accepted this version of herself as containing much truth, we simply do not know” (119). Finally, she makes connections on a couple of occasions between particular stories and her relationship with Murry – “Murry could not come well out of *‘Je ne parle pas francais’*” (170) – and in another example Tomalin notes that Mansfield on one occasion sent Murry “a story, ‘The Man without a Temperament’; it contained another implied reproach, though a subtle one, for its hero has devoted himself to an invalid wife and is living out an intolerable existence in foreign hotels” (194). Tomalin is also concerned with connections between Mansfield’s life and her influence on other contemporary writers, including women writers.

She highlights Mansfield’s relationships in particular with D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, suggesting in the “Foreword” that

Katherine’s relations with D.H. Lawrence have been generally underplayed. I have, I hope, shown just how close and important the links between them were, and in particular the use Lawrence made of her experience in some of his most controversial

writing. The impress of Katherine's personality on two of the greatest of her contemporaries, Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, produced some remarkable results. (2)

Tomalin argues that Lawrence used "things about her New Zealand childhood" (126) in his novel *The Rainbow* (1915), and that she was "a model for a character in *Women in Love*" (126). Tomalin comments on the danger of making life-to-work connections, and acknowledges that novelists "rarely draw exact portraits, and [that] it is a finicky, and finally impossible, business 'proving' that a character is inspired by a real acquaintance" (152), but she nevertheless maintains that aspects of the "essential Katherine" (152) can be found in this novel by Lawrence. Tomalin goes on in the biography to explore other examples of their friendship and the extent to which "she inhabited his imagination" (186). Her life was not only part of her own writing legacy, but also that of others and the collaborative nature of her writing life is emphasized in this biography.

She dedicates one chapter to Mansfield's connection with three contemporary women, Virginia Woolf, Lady Ottoline Morrell and Frieda Weekley, and suggests that if "we pause to trace the experiences of some of Katherine's contemporaries who were later to become her friends, a clear pattern emerges of women crossing barriers of class and defying the sexual conventions" (48): "These women shared a common determination to escape from the worlds they had been born into, to reject the moral, social and cultural rules inculcated into them in their childhood" (54). Tomalin reiterates the importance of Mansfield's relationship with Virginia Woolf: "both felt themselves to be writers first and foremost, everything else ... [was] of lesser importance" (200). Woolf influenced Mansfield's story "The Aloe" (1917) and the biography identifies common themes between *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Mansfield's stories "Prelude" (1918) and "At the Bay" (1922). I would argue that Tomalin provides the reader, whether academic or general, with exciting adventure stories of unconventional young women like Mansfield and Wollstonecraft whose

experiences shed light both on a past age and on our own, particularly in terms of attitudes to gender. Both women lived unconventionally and were dismissive of the social conventions of their time, without being overtly active within any political movements to change the lives of women; theirs are stories about writers whose lives nevertheless heralded changes in the lives of their peers and Tomalin is interested in the connections which can be made between the experience of women as a whole and those of Mansfield and Wollstonecraft as writers.

After her biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft and Katherine Mansfield, Tomalin went on to write about Dora Jordan and Nelly Ternan. Ternan's relationship with Charles Dickens is interesting in part because of the way in which it tells us something about a very private aspect of Dickens's life, but this is not a literary biography and the relation between these aspects and Dickens's fiction is not explored in any great detail. Tomalin then writes a biography about another woman who struggled with the confines of her life, although, as Tomalin notes, not a woman who advocated women's rights, at least not overtly, Jane Austen: "Her formal silence on the position of women is qualified by the way in which her books insist on the moral and intellectual parity of the sexes" (141). In the Austen biography Tomalin writes in more detail about the work of her subject, but the way she does so in comparison with her later biography of Hardy is telling; in writing about Austen's novels Tomalin is cautious to avoid the biographical fallacy, but in her biography of Hardy it becomes intrinsic to the life she wants to tell.

Early in her biography of Austen Tomalin makes a very specific point to differentiate between the life of her subject and her novels, though her life as a writer and her day to day life are closely connected:

In the novels, only Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Sir Walter Elliot take much notice of ancestry and pride themselves on it, and neither is an advertisement for the preoccupation. Jane Austen also chose to write about small families; the Bennets with

their five daughters are the largest to be put under close scrutiny. Her experience in life was different. Not only was she one of eight, she lived with a perpetual awareness of a cousinage extending over many counties and even beyond England. Family history and connections on both sides were seen as important. (11)

At times Tomalin does mention people who might have influenced characterizations in her novels: a neighbour when Austen was living in Steventon, William Heathcote, had a face “that could have modeled for Darcy or Willoughby” (94); another Caroline Wiggett was not allowed to keep in touch with her family as a child, after her parents died, and Tomalin suggests that “There is something here of Fanny Price’s story in *Mansfield Park*” (99); in relation to another neighbor, Eliza Chute, Tomalin believes that there “are several ... parallels between Chute experience and Austen imagination” (99). Tomalin argues that we should nevertheless be cautious about drawing too many specific links between life and work and she does not suggest that these characters are drawn as direct characterizations of these people:

What Jane Austen wanted from life around her, she took and used, finely and tangentially. We can make a few guesses.... Some of these links may be true links, others not; what is certain is that Austen took precisely the elements she wanted from her neighbours and no more. (102)

A particularly interesting connection between life and work is the suggestion that Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* may have been based on Mary Wollstonecraft, but Tomalin is careful not to over emphasise this: she is “not suggesting that Austen modeled Marianne on her, only that the theme of sensibility, outspokenness, refusal to conform to social rules and attempted self-destruction when love fails are paralleled in the two cases” (161). Tomalin notes that Wollstonecraft’s life and writing “was much in the air in the 1790s” (160) when Austen was working on early drafts of the novel. Tomalin argues that Austen also draws on her

experience of particular places and environments in her writing: “Jane had been to Bath once before ... and she had a good reason to want to go back, since much of the action of the book on which she was working (*Northanger Abbey*) took place there” (148) – this visit was before the Austens left Steventon and moved to Bath on a permanent basis. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen, according to Tomalin, is “creating a world altogether unlike the one in which she was living ... [and] Elizabeth is not a version of herself” (162), although Wickham and the other officers in the novel “are the one feature of the book that ties it into Austen’s known experience” (166). It is difficult not to believe that Tomalin would have been influenced by contemporary critics of literary biography when she writes:

The truth is that Austen depended very little on fresh scenes and new acquaintance; her work was done in her head, when she began to see the possibility of a certain situation and set of characters, and her books are never transcripts of what she saw going on around her. (169)

Taking this perspective in the context of earlier examples from the biography which suggest that Austen draws on her experiences to inform her writing, I would suggest that Tomalin is arguing that Austen imaginatively transformed her life experiences in her writing.

In a biography published ten years later, however, Tomalin is less cautious about the dangers of the biographical fallacy. In *Thomas Hardy: The Time Torn Man* (2007), one of Tomalin’s main themes is the connections between hidden aspects of his life and who he was as a man and as a writer: she “attempts to discuss Hardy’s work in the context of his life” (vii), and in the “Prologue” she explains that “This book is about how Hardy became a writer, poet and novelist” (xxv). On the one hand, Tomalin’s approach suggests that Hardy did not base all aspects of a character or events in his novels on someone he knew or something specific that happened in his life, arguing instead that Hardy draws on and transforms his experience; an important strand in her analysis is how his rough-and-tumble life battered

Hardy and influenced the tone and content of his novels. He had the “capacity to store up particular experiences and draw on them imaginatively in his writing years later” (18). On the other hand, Tomalin does make some very specific connections between Hardy’s life and work, particularly his poems rather than his novels, which leave her open to accusations that she allows herself to become a victim of the biographical fallacy.

Tomalin’s discussions of Hardy’s novels can be several pages long, and may be focused on one of the main characters, such as Bathsheba in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), Eustacia in *The Return of the Native* (1878), Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Tess in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), and Jude in *Jude the Obscure* (1895). She does make some connections between characters in his novels and people Hardy knew and although these instances are rare they are more direct than the comments she makes in her biography of Austen. For example, “Mrs Yeobright in *The Return of the Native* has something of [his mother’s] character” (22); “Many years later Hardy said he modelled Bathsheba, the heroine of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, on his Aunt Martha” (28); and Emma also influences some aspects of the character of Bathsheba from *Far From the Madding Crowd*: “Some of the glow of his love for Emma is there in the writing ... Bathsheba ... is plainly not Emma, but at the same time she shares some of her enthusiasms, notably horse riding” (127). But Tomalin seems most interested in understanding what thoughts may have been on Hardy’s mind at the time of writing. For example, Tomalin draws parallels between Henchard’s suicide and the suicide of Hardy’s friend in his youth, Horace Moule:

Although Horace Moule was an entirely different case, it is still possible there were thoughts of him – drinker, charmer and suicide – coming into play in Hardy’s mind. In everyone there is some guilt, some fear that events from the past may turn out to have unforeseen consequences, and it may be that the gossip Hardy had heard of



Moule's bad behaviour to a poor Dorchester girl who went to Australia, pregnant with his child, was in his mind. (208-9)

Tomalin comments on Hardy's discovery that he was an unwanted child, noting that "when he wrote fictional accounts of country girls [like his mother] seduced and pregnant, he made Fanny Robin and Tess into romantic figures and victims ... He sympathized with them and defended them, but he showed them punished with the severity his society regards as appropriate. In no way did they reflect anything that is known of the lives of the women of his family" (17). Nevertheless, Tomalin is drawing our attention to possible connections between Hardy's experience in his close family and his novels.

Her discussion of Hardy's later novels is another example where she makes connections between his life and novels. In the case of *Jude the Obscure*, Tomalin argues that the plot of the novel "showed that Hardy's anger had never been extinguished" (254). Hardy is shown to be a deeply angry man in whom the "wounds of life never quite healed over ... Humiliation, rejection, condescension, failure and loss remained so close to the skin that the scars bled again at the slightest occasion. This is why many of his poems return to the grief of the past. It is also why the rage that appears in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, was fuelled in the 1890s by the anger he felt in the 1860s" (83). Tomalin describes other examples of how this highly successful public man struggled with depression and rage:

The three novels he published during his first decade at Max Gate, from 1885 to 1895, were marked by a fierce questioning of accepted ideas about society and by a gloom that grew deeper from book to book.... The books are powerful, bleak and sometimes savage in their representation of human experience: the Hardy who moved between his London club, visits to distinguished friends and a home well staffed with servants is not easy to connect with them. (218)

In *Jude the Obscure* (1895) Tomalin argues that Hardy draws from his childhood although “Hardy made the standard novelist’s denial that there was anything autobiographical in the book” (258). She makes a connection between a scene in the novel which “shows Jude looking through his straw hat ... and thinking” (258) and Hardy’s own experience: “This is exactly what Hardy described as his own experience, looking through his straw hat as a child and thinking ‘that he did not want to wish to grow up’” (258). Tomalin suggests that the “power of the scene in the novel comes from Hardy’s memory of himself.... Hardy appears to be reinventing his childhood and making it worse” (258). As in her biography of Austen, Tomalin is interested in the “the gap between his imaginative life and the day-to-day events going on around him” (312). And she writes about connections between life and work:

A writer deeply engaged and absorbed in his work may surprise himself, and this may be what happened as Hardy wrote *Jude*, and may help to explain its unrelenting power and gloom.... Perhaps we can believe that the worst parts of Jude and Sue’s story ... came partly unbidden, out of the place inside him where the wounds made by grief and loss and humiliation had never ceased to ache. (258)

Tomalin is keen to explore the extent to which there is a connection between Hardy’s state of mind and the themes in the novels, and on one or two occasions she then goes on to discuss them in the context of academic literary criticism, making judgements about the novels in relation to Hardy’s life. For example: “*The Woodlanders*, which he embarked on in 1885 ... is like a black version of *Far From the Madding Crowd*.... Richard Hutton, an editor of the *Spectator* ... saw Hardy as setting out to shock and depress, and skewing the plot accordingly” (219); this “criticism has been repeated in a different form by one of Hardy’s most intelligent twentieth-century critics, Irving Howe” (220). Tomalin also discusses David Lodge’s criticism of this novel and his view that “it is simple and sentimental to read his novel as tragedy” (220). She challenges this perspective, suggesting that to deny the fate of

the characters in the novel “as tragic is to deny them their dignity and truth, and to miss Hardy’s gloomy point about the vulnerability of the poor” (221). Also, in this biography Tomalin engages in some of her most ambitious literary criticism, particularly in her discussion of Hardy’s poems: the poems in his first collection, *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* (1898), Tomalin suggests are written “in a great variety of styles, from the expansive ballad narrative to the intensely concentrated utterance” (280); “His poem ‘Shut Out That Moon’ ... speaks of the failure of love ... draws on the imagery of the Romantic poets” (288); commenting on a late poem, *The Dynasts* (1908) she argues that “Blank verse needs a spring in it, and this has neither spring nor strength, but feebly apes Shakespearean historical writing” (293). This biography suggests that a popular biographer can move seamlessly into literary criticism to write about the literary narrative of her subjects, though in doing so, as we shall see, she opens herself up to academic attack.

Finally, the most explicit example of the biographical fallacy in this biography is the direct connection that Tomalin makes between the death of Hardy’s first wife, Emma, and Hardy’s later poetry, and this is a core theme in the biography. Tomalin makes her view clear at the beginning of the biography:

Hardy was a writer who made many of his best effects out of incidents and stories he had collected and put aside, sights stored up, feelings he had kept to himself, anger he had not shown to the world. In these poems about Emma he is rediscovering repressed sorrow and forgotten love.... He has found the most perfect subject he ever had.  
(xxiii)

Later in the biography, discussing Hardy’s poems written over the fifteen years following Emma’s death, Tomalin argues that at “the centre of the story of his past was always Emma ... Some thirty-six poems allude to her, and they run from minutely specific incidents of their wooing in Cornwall to his sad imaginings at Max Gate” (322); and in these poems “you see

that his memories of her are his own story too, which he continually unfolds and turns about like a much consulted map” (360). However, a rejection of the biographical fallacy by a biographer and the suggestion that he or she can create one version, albeit not a final one, of a writer’s life, including the specific autobiographical roots of literary work, may continue to leave the genre open to criticism from academic critics. Tomalin is on safer ground when she writes about how Hardy may have imaginatively transformed his life experiences in his work and what may have been on his mind at the time he was writing.

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As this study of Tomalin’s work suggests, there is ample evidence that she has indeed responded to the critics of biography and is alert to the concerns of her critics. Tomalin clearly understands that the nature of truth in biography is always mediated and provisional but argues that this does not mean that an attempt to make connections is invalid and cannot produce authentic portraits<sup>15</sup>. Tomalin upholds the biographers’ mantra that she is “an artist on oath” and does not invent evidence but reserves the right to speculate when hard evidence is not available. She responds in her work to critics who suggest that biographers are not aware that autobiographical evidence may be unreliable and that biography can only offer conventional, chronological realist narrative. She also acknowledges the close relationship between biography and fiction, and the potential for biography to illuminate wider social, cultural and political discourses. She makes a plea for biography as a genre which is not homogenous and argues that biographers have a legitimate role in helping to develop our understanding of any one life. However, at times when she writes about the works of her

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<sup>15</sup> Lee, in the context of a discussion about the use of sources and evidence in biography in the twentieth century suggests a range of reasons why authenticity may be difficult: a biographer may not be at liberty to disclose information if secrecy was agreed with interviewees; it may not be possible to identify statements from living witnesses; questions of copyright and permission may arise, to name but a few. As Lee comments, “Authenticity is desirable in biography, but is not always the rule” (*A Very Short Introduction* 11).

subjects she leaves herself open to criticism. Certainly whilst accepting aspects of postmodern theory Tomalin has not always heeded the critique of the biographical fallacy.

## Chapter 4

### Richard Holmes and the Implied Biographer

Richard Holmes is a Fellow of the British Academy, Professor of Biographical Studies at the University of East Anglia (2001-2007) and has honorary doctorates from the University of East Anglia, Kingston University and the Tavistock Institute. He is the author of *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974), a two volume biography of Coleridge, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (1989) and *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (1998), *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* (2005), *The Romantic Poets and Their Circle* (2005), *The Age of Wonder* (2008), about Romantic scientists, and two major studies of biography, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985) and *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer* (2000). This chapter will discuss how the work of Holmes, far from being cut off from theoretical debates within academia, is alert to them. As I will argue in this chapter, Holmes has called himself a Romantic biographer and I will provide evidence to illustrate that he is criticized for being out of touch with more recent theories, New Historicism and Feminism in particular. I will suggest that his work can be understood not only in the context of Romanticism but also in the context of the biographical theories of Leon Edel and Ira Nadel which complement aspects of his Romanticism. Two important books which offer theories about biography, a 1984 edition of Edel's *Writing Lives*, first published in 1957 but influential in the 1980s, and Nadel's *Biography, Fiction, Fact and Form*, also published in 1984, were published at the same time as Holmes's own study of the genre, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985). I will argue that a study of Holmes's biographical writing shows traces of different aspects of biographical theory, some of which, in particular the work of Edel, is pre-Theory but has nevertheless been encompassed within late-twentieth century debates about the genre. I want to suggest that whilst Holmes's work may not fully embrace late-twentieth century Theory, his biographical writing offers an example of biography written in this period

which has responded to different aspects of academic debate, although critics may not agree with his overall approach, as we shall see in a later chapter, and much of his work remains rooted in Romanticism and the influence of traditional biography.

The chapter will consider the claim that biographers make poor historians. Holmes's approach to historiography questions hard and fast distinctions between fact and fiction and is influenced by three factors: Romanticism, debates about how biographies seek to achieve an understanding of the inner world and self of their subjects, and a demand for more creative, inventive ways of writing that enable biographers to bring their subjects to life.

One of the tensions grappled with throughout the research for this thesis has been how to respond to an underlying question: can the search for knowledge by a biographer really find out what a biographical subject was really like and the extent to which his or her personal life and character influenced their professional life, writing in the case of literary biography? This tension can be understood to lie between two poles that recur throughout the critical material about the genre: the complex dynamic between fact and fiction, and between historical and ontological understandings of others and ourselves. On one end we have an understanding of authenticity in biography as rooted in fact, in objective, material information about ourselves and others, described in chronological narrative which avoids speculation, invention or intervention from the narrator. On the other end, we have a version of biographical narrative based on fiction, an ontological perspective, presented in creative and invented narrative framed by figurative language and dramatic or rhetorical flourishes. This thesis will show that biography is rarely wholly at one or other pole, is always somewhere in between the two.

## Representative “Great” Lives

Holmes is drawn to the Romantic period as a biographer, not only writing about the Romantic period but drawing on Romanticism in his approach to biographical writing; as Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes argue, “Romantic life-writing remains historically, philosophically and ideologically indebted to the period it tries to recover ... To talk about ‘Romantic biography’ ... is to say as much about the Romanticism of biographers such as ... Holmes as that of biographees like Byron, Keats and Shelley”(xii). Holmes not only writes about people from the Romantic period, he sees himself as a Romantic biographer who believes in the values and ideology of the Romantics he is writing about; he sees his life as a biographer as a “thirty-year journey in search of the perfect Romantic subject, and the form to fit it” (*Sidetracks* ix) and suggests that “biography itself, with its central tenet of empathy, is essentially a Romantic form” (*Dr Johnson & Mr Savage* 230). But Bradley and Rawes argue that there is a need to “de-Romanticize” Romantic biography, “to wrench it clear of various historically bounded assumptions about subjectivity” (xii). They cite the New Historicist Jerome McGann: by “re-situating ... biography in relation to the full diversity and plurality of the Romantic period”, McGann hopes to counter “Romantic biography’s traditional concentration on the singular lives of great men whose genius transcends time and place”, a concentration which “has perpetuated this displacement of history more effectively than most” (xiii). McGann argues that “poems are social and historical products and that the critical study of such products must be grounded in a socio-historical analytic” (*The Romantic Ideology* 3). Holmes however, appears to repudiate McGann by perpetuating a traditional concentration on the lives of ‘great’ men and is committed to the assumptions about subjectivity which Bradley, Rawes and McGann are criticizing. He writes, as Ralph Pite puts it, “within a markedly Romantic paradigm which governs both his style of biography and his conceptions of the poet and the self” (168). The following sections will



consider aspects of Holmes's Romanticism in the context of these debates: first, the extent to which Holmes only writes about the singular lives of great men; second, his at times seeming conflation of past and present experiences; third, the associations he makes between his subjects' outer and inner lives; and fourth, the extent to which his approach to biographical narrative informs his version of both his subjects and his relationship with them.

In his introduction to the first volume of his biography of Coleridge, Holmes is clear that he wants "to show what sort of visionary Coleridge was, and why – among all the English Romantics – he is worth rediscovering today" (xiii). He argues that, "the real challenge for me has been simply to unearth his 'human story', his living footsteps through the world" (*Early Visions* xv). His interest is primarily in the man, his genius and ability to understand his age, rather than the wider political or social context in which he lived. Holmes tends to support an uncritical attitude to Coleridge and criticise his friends when they do not. Holmes comments wryly, for example, that at one point in their friendship, "Wordsworth's role as friend and confidant, and go-between with Asra, [his unmarried sister-in-law with whom the married Coleridge was in love, much to her dismay and Wordsworth's] is not entirely easy to understand" (*Darker Reflections* 76); two supposed friends of Coleridge's, Dorothy Wordsworth and Catherine Clarkson, are implicitly criticized for conducting "a confidential correspondence about Coleridge's health and marriage which provided an inexhaustible topic for gossip over the next four years" (74); Robert Southey, who was caught up with Coleridge's disagreements with his wife about their future together, gossiped "with cruel indiscretion", and seemed "to take perverse delight in the whole, sad business" (78); and in a final example, Wordsworth wrote to Thomas Poole when Coleridge was about to publish the first edition of his journal *The Friend*, making it clear that he thought Coleridge would fail and suggesting that he "neither will nor can execute anything of important benefit either to himself, his family or mankind" (163). Holmes comments on this last example:

“Such was the opinion of Coleridge’s most valued and intimate companion, his literary comrade in arms for over a decade, at this crucial moment in May 1809” (163). When Holmes reflects directly on the importance of key friendships in Coleridge’s early life, he suggests that friendship itself became for him “part of his Romantic creed, vividly expressed in the ideal of an intimate masculine circle sharing thoughts and feelings and confidences which stretch across or beyond domestic boundaries” (126). But in the introduction to *Early Visions*, Holmes makes clear that Coleridge’s “array of friends among the living and among the dead, have not been allowed to obstruct the tale necessarily, but find a subsidiary place in a form of dramatis personae listing, “Coleridge’s Circle”, at the end of the book” (*Early Visions* xv). For Holmes these relationships are ancillary or, as with Wordsworth at times, negative.

Other recent biographies, however, have taken a wider interest in friendships, a trend recognized by Holmes: “The monolithic” single Life is giving way to biographies of groups, of friendships, of love-affairs” (“Whatever is Happening in Biography” 140). Sisman in *The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge* (2006), is keen to respond to the partisanship in individual biographies about the two poets and concentrates “on the friendship itself ... [and] their joint mission, to fulfil the hopes of a generation disappointed at the failure of the French Revolution” (xxiii). Another group biography, *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives* (2010), by Daisy Hay argues that these poets were fundamentally influenced by their friendships and avoids the focus on individuals in Holmes’s work. Even in his postmillennial work on the lives of Romantic-period scientists, *The Age of Wonder* (2008), Holmes’s version of a group biography, he discusses the lives of individual figures, three in particular, one by one. His biography, which “aims to present scientific passion” (xx), centres on the lives of the explorer Joseph Banks, the astronomer William Herschel and the chemist Humphrey Davy.

However, in a recent essay, Holmes challenges the view that “the narratives of individual scientists are not important, because it is the great cumulative, impersonal body of scientific knowledge and law which alone counts” (“Whatever is Happening in Biography” 139). He argues that “the emergence of new controversial stars of popular science writing ... has put the personal element back into science” (139) and he promotes a Romantic version of Romantic science: “We want to know what drives individual scientists to make their discoveries (and especially their mistakes); and, above all perhaps how they feel about non-scientific things: love, religion, politics for example. Renewed interest in the ethical dilemmas posed by scientific discovery requires a humanist response” (139). He agrees that Romantic science embraced, among other things, “the dazzling idea of the solitary scientific ‘genius’, thirsting and reckless for knowledge, *for its own sake and perhaps at any cost*” (xvii); the “intuitive inspired instant of invention or discovery ... allied it very closely to poetic inspiration and creativity” (xvii). He makes a plea for science “to be presented and explored in a new way. We need not only a new history of science, but a more enlarged and imaginative biographical writing about individual scientists” (468). Holmes in other words, remains interested first and foremost in the lives of great men and the passionate journeys of the solitary genius. Group biography considers the relationship between several people either as family members, or as professional peers and the impact they may have had as a group, but Holmes’s approach focuses on several significant individuals who lived in the same period and represent a particular theme, in this case the relationship between science and Romanticism. In the service of this theme, he writes a “group” biography that underplays group identity.

However, despite this one could argue that Holmes has offered a wider historical understanding of the past – certainly of Romanticism – through the lives of “great men”, whether poets or scientists. In his first biography about the poet Shelley, Holmes is very

explicit in his introduction in claiming that Shelley's life and work represent a key moment in history: "Shelley's major creative effort was concentrated on producing a series of long poems and poetic dramas aimed at the main political and spiritual problems of his age and society" (xiii). Holmes draws heavily on perceived connections between the 1960s, when he was a student, and the Romantic period. As he puts it in *Footsteps* (1985), looking back on the 1960s, "what I was feeling, what my friends were feeling, seemed to be expressed perfectly by the Romantics ... It was a replay, a rerun, a harmonic echo across nearly two centuries. The whole ethos of the Sixties ... was based on a profoundly romantic rejection of conventional society, the old order, the establishment, the classical" (*Footsteps* 75). Holmes had made this connection in his introduction to the Shelley biography, which, like all biography, "reflects often unconsciously the concerns and questions of its own age, and it passes on something hidden to the future" (*Shelley* ix-x). Holmes knows that "one could not cross literally into the past" (*Footsteps* 27), but his understanding of biography as a pursuit evokes the biographical imagination:

Biography ... was to become a kind of pursuit, a tracking of the physical trail of someone's path through the past, a following of footsteps. You could never catch them ... But maybe, if you were lucky, you might write about the pursuit of that fleeting figure in such a way as to bring it alive in the present. (27)

At the heart of Holmes's quest to empathise with and re-experience the past, therefore, is his allegiance to Romanticism. Marilyn Butler comments that: "The idea of the 'Romantic Poet' or bohemian intellectual opposing society was as attractive following the demonstrations and barricades of the 1960s as it was after 1830 and 1848" (*Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* 3). "Perhaps", she writes, somewhat sceptically, "it has become even easier to believe that Romanticism was part of the revolution in the second half of the twentieth century than it was

in the nineteenth” (5). In his approach Holmes and others like him are understood as out of tune with more recent academic theory.

Marilyn Butler’s New Historicist perspective is critical of the tendency to eulogise individual canonical poets, and to ignore the nature of literature as a collective and political activity. Like Jerome McGann, she sees this tendency as an expression of what McGann calls ‘Romantic Ideology’:

The majority of modern critical works subscribe to the cult of the Romantic writer in all kinds of indirect ways. It is common to read and write biographies and critical studies of single writers, in isolation, which proceed as though the poet alone is the creator of his poetry.... Literature, like all art, like language, is a collective activity, powerfully conditioned by social forces ... authors are not the solitaires of the Romantic myth, but citizens. (“The Rise of the Man of Letters” 10)

This has been an influential position in academic criticism. Two aspects of Holmes’s writing help to clarify why his work may be viewed as representative of the kind of narrative that New Historicists such as Butler and McGann have criticised: his focus on male subjects; and the extent to which he sees his subjects as representative figures of their time.

Anne Mellor’s work offers one way to understand Holmes’s approach to the lives of individual ‘great’ men. She argues that when “we focus on the role that gender plays in masculine Romanticism, we often see the poet appropriating whatever of the feminine he deems valuable” (27), “Positive feminine characteristics – sensibility, compassion, maternal love – are metaphorically appropriated by the male poet” (29). Empathy, compassion, the search for an intimate connection with his subjects are important parts of Holmes’s commitment as a biographer and perhaps he has appropriated some of the gendered characteristics that he finds in Romanticism in his biographical writing: “If I had to define biography in a single phrase I would call it an art of human understanding” (“Inventing the

Truth” 25). But for some critics it is Holmes’s very pursuit of empathy that has compromised his analysis. Pite is concerned that Holmes privileges experience – recreation of the subject’s experience – over analysis and that in the case of Holmes’s biography of Coleridge, this produces “the belief that sympathy and judgement conflict with one another, as if one’s relations with another person are most humane when least appraising” (170). Also, Holmes’s subjects are certainly understood through their domestic as well as professional lives, and Holmes is keen to place them within their relationships, to describe their homes and domestic worlds, but he nevertheless often undervalues or fails to extend the sort of empathy to the women in his subjects’ lives that he extends to the subjects themselves. This is similar to the way that he understands the role of his subjects’ friends. For example, in 1814 Coleridge’s wife writes to Tom Poole complaining that she never hears from Coleridge, and of the impact his absence had on their children. Holmes adds a comment, “but there was no mention of what Coleridge might have suffered” (369). There is a hint of insensitivity and bias here, some would say. To some extent Holmes has appropriated a gendered perspective without acknowledging perhaps as much as he could have done the power relationships between men and women.

Although Holmes’s biographical subjects up to 2010 have all been male, in *Sidetracks* he notes the impact of women writers: “it is impossible to imagine the development of Feminism over the last twenty years, without the rediscovery and reinterpretation of such exemplary existences as those of Mary Wollstonecraft, Aphra Behn, Dorothy Wordsworth, Zelda Fitzgerald, or indeed Vita” (375). In an article about a possible new group biography about women scientists Holmes recognises that “compared with their literary sisters, the scientific women of the nineteenth century still appear invisible, if not actually nonexistent” (“Pioneering Women” 12):

Indeed, the Royal Society archives suggest something so fundamental that it may require a subtle revision of the standard history of science in Britain. This is the previously unsuspected degree to which women were a catalyst in the early discussion of the social role of science. (12)

It will be interesting to see whether, if published, this biography continues to focus on each individual scientist, without placing them adequately within the social, cultural and political contexts which informed the development of their work and their influence as a group.

Concerns about Holmes's privileging of the male subject often combine with his privileging of the individual per se in biography; as with *The Age of Wonder*, writing a group biography of women scientists which focuses primarily on individual lives may still not satisfy biography's theoretical critics. The criticism that biography is individualistic lies at the heart of New Historicism's suspicion of, or hostility towards, the genre. New Historicist critics are especially concerned about the hero worship and myth of genius that underpins much Romantic biography and leads biographers to draw connections between the past of Romantic poets and the present. Holmes, of course, is a case in point, being keen in his biography of Coleridge to reveal "the visionary hero" (xvi) and stressing the importance of understanding the genius of individual Romantic scientists to inform our understanding of science today.

Butler is critical of what she sees as a "Romantic" view of Coleridge, as some kind of a visionary. She argues that "Coleridge's really significant or at least influential career was as a moulder of opinion" ('The Rise of the Man of Letters' 88), and she is concerned about the mythologising of male Romantic subjects as solitary geniuses: "a thinker probably becomes 'influential', that is, read, admired and echoed, because he has ideas in common with others, rather than because he initiates them" (*Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* 23). And she is concerned about the way connections are made by Holmes between the 1960s and the

Romantic period. What New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt believes in, however, is the power of individuals to be representative of the past and to have the power to inform our lives in the present. Stephen Greenblatt argues that in our understanding of history it is not possible to draw on thousands of figures, so “from the thousands, we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns ... who seem ... to express and even, by design, to embody [their culture’s] dominant satisfactions and anxieties” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 7). But the crucial distinction here is that for individuals to embody an age they do not have to be mythical heroes or heroines, they can be ordinary people living ordinary lives who are representative of their society or cultural or racial background. As the criticism of Butler and McGann illustrates, Holmes is understood by some academic critics as a biographer who believes that heroic figures embody an age because they offer something extraordinary<sup>16</sup>, and in many ways their lives have to be ‘larger than life’ if they are to be fitting subjects for biography whoever they are. However, despite the views of his critics, in his writing about the genre and his experience as a biographer, Holmes shows that he is aware that any life can be special in this way: “Once known in any detail and any scope, every life is something extraordinary, full of particular drama and tension and surprise, often containing unimagined degrees of suffering and heroism, and invariably touching extreme moments of triumph and despair” (*Footsteps* 208). And Holmes has already found something extraordinary in the lives of some women; in a short study of the French Revolution Holmes finds his “heroine” (*Footsteps* 90) Mary Wollstonecraft who

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<sup>16</sup> There is a crucial distinction between the notions of a biographical subject who can embody an age because they are a genius and a ‘cut above’ ordinary people and one which, as Bate suggests, can ensoul an age in part because of their genius, like Shakespeare of course, but also because they can represent to some extent ordinary people and the time in which they lived. I have attempted to argue here that Holmes is understood by critics influenced by New Historicism – see Greenblatt reference in note 4 – like McGann and Butler, to be a biographer who does not fully accept this wider analysis. Whilst on the other hand, for Bate, Shakespeare was “Both ‘not of an age’ and ‘Soul of the Age’”. For Ralph Waldo Emerson ... Shakespeare was ‘inconceivably wise’, possessed of a brain so uniquely vast that no one can penetrate it. But at the same time, he was the incarnation of ‘a cause, a country, and an age’. It is this double quality that makes Shakespeare, in Emerson’s phrase, the representative poet” (3).



becomes his guide to understanding this major historical event. He sees her relationship with her lover Gilbert Imlay as representative: the “natural focusing effect of biography had, in a sense, reduced the entire outcome of the revolution to the success or failure of a single relationship” (*Footsteps* 114). Nevertheless critics are concerned that Holmes focuses unduly on the nature of genius as his work in *The Age of Wonder* suggests.

### **An Ontological Focus**

A key focus in Holmes’s biography, as in Romanticism, is the search by the biographer to understand the inner life and imagination of the Romantic subject. Leon Edel’s theory and practice of biography, which develops a biographical theory drawn from psychoanalysis, also stresses the internal life of biographical subjects, suggesting that “when we come as close as possible to character and personality and to the nature of temperament and genius we have written the kind of biography that comes closest to truth” (*Writing Lives* 108)<sup>17</sup>. Holmes cites Edel’s *Writing Lives* as a pioneering study of biography as a genre (“The Proper Study” 12). In the 1980s the influence of psychoanalytic approaches remained prevalent, particularly in the US. Frederick Karl argues in a paper published in 1985 that literary biography needs psychological analyses because “the chief consideration if we attempt to blend subject and work is internal, analytical” (“Joseph Conrad” 70). However, Karl counsels caution because psychoanalytic readings can be reductive and treat all behaviour as driven by illness or neurosis, and in literary biography “the work should be used only sparingly to understand the subject and the subject only tentatively to understand the work” (71). I suggest that elements of this kind of reductive approach can be found in Holmes’s work.

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<sup>17</sup> Edel believes that a focus on the inner life and personality of a biographical subject comes closer to a more complete version of a life. As quoted in an earlier chapter, reflecting a prevalent view amongst biographers and critics alike, biographer Bernard Crick makes clear that “None of us can enter into another person’s mind; to believe so is fiction” (30) and ultimately, as argued throughout this thesis, a biography is one version of a life, albeit that some versions will be more authentic than others.

In *Writing Lives*, Edel proposes what he calls a new biography, a species of “literary psychology” one aim of which is to analyse “the manifestations of the unconscious as they are projected in conscious forms of action ... biography must look for deeper truths, for the private mythology of a subject ... to discover certain keys to the deeper truths ... to the private mythology of the individual” (*Writing Lives* 29) – what Edel, influenced by a ghost story by Henry James “The Figure in the Carpet” (1898), calls “the figure under the carpet” (29) or “the private self-concept that guides a given life” (30). I would argue that Holmes seems to be looking for these manifestations of the unconscious and for the figure “under” the carpet in his life of Coleridge. In his introduction to the biography he argues that he wants to

examine [Coleridge’s] entire life in a broad and sympathetic manner, and to ask the one vital question: what made Coleridge – for all his extravagant panoply of faults – such an extraordinary man, such an extraordinary mind?... to recapture his fascination as a man and a writer, and above all to make him live, move, talk, and “have his being”. (xiii)

The search for the “one vital question”, what Edel calls a “private mythology”, leads both Edel and Holmes to take a similar approach to Coleridge’s drug addiction. Coleridge, according to Edel, was the first and foremost literary psychologist, believing that art “begins in the back rooms of concealed memory, old sensations and hidden feelings. But what started as impalpable motion is altered by the artist into something material in time and space.... the poet, in the sufferings of his illness which led to an opium addiction, was also led to supreme moments of self awareness” (*Stuff of Sleep and Dreams* 13-14). Holmes also focuses on the nature of Coleridge’s addiction and sees it as key to his “private self-concept”. There are at least twenty five anecdotes about the nature and level of Coleridge’s addiction in the biography, as well as discussions about those who helped him when his addiction became

part of his day to day life. Holmes writes, in a way which is evocative of Edel's approach, that "one can glimpse something new stirring in that extraordinarily flexible and resourceful mind: the hope of recreating himself imaginatively out of the sense of failure itself. First he had deserts of opium, illness, and domestic unhappiness to cross; and endless unavailing visions of escape to live through. But he would do it, he would endure, he would write" (296). For M.H. Abrams this trope of failure is one of the main definitions of Romanticism: the "neoclassical satisfaction in the perfectly accomplished, because limited, enterprise was replaced ... by a preference for the glory of the imperfect, in which the artist's failure attests the grandeur of his aim" (187). Part of what we are asked to admire about Romantic artists is their capacity to overcome internal impediments – doubt about their capacity, including the capacity to withstand suffering, isolation, and the debilitating effects of addiction and poor health. Holmes believes that

this long withdrawal into illness and opium, isolated in the remote fire lit world of his study, a sort of hermit's retreat, served Coleridge in its own way.... Digging back into his own mind and beliefs, he found the beginnings of a new literary identity ... Coleridge found the authority of his poetic failure.... The painful uncertainties of his inner visionary world now themselves supplied him with the richest imaginative materials. (301)

David Ellis, himself a biographer as well as an academic, is very cautious about attributing characteristics or behaviour to illness, a common habit in Romantic biography. He suggests that there are "two remarkably influential paradigms in biographers' treatment of illness. One of these is that there is some natural connection between the pathological and the creative: that no person who is completely 'healthy' is likely to do important work. The second ... is that there is a providential scheme which ensures that the severest of afflictions are likely to bring their compensations" (83). Holmes's approach to Coleridge seems to embrace these

paradigms. Ralph Pite is also critical of Holmes's vision of Coleridge, suggesting that his "support seems to be reserved for Coleridge the victim and idealist, and the creation of such a figure is needed before his sympathy will come into play" (169). The level or nature of Coleridge's opium addiction and what unconscious determining factor drove him to become dependent on the drug, are key themes in *Darker Reflections*, and in pursuing these themes Holmes seems to seek in Coleridge's life the supreme moment of self awareness sought by Edel.

Another way that Holmes tried to reach Coleridge's unconscious and understand his imagination involves a startling example of the biographical fallacy. In Chapter Eight of *Darker Visions*, "True Confessions", is a thirty four page section, covering 1815, ostensibly on the style and content of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. The *Biographia*, "part fact, part fiction, part theory" (378), has a three-part structure, "Autobiography in Chapters 1-14, Philosophy in Chapters 5-13, Criticism in Chapters 14-22" (379). Holmes suggests that Coleridge thought this work "would prove more important than his collected poems" (405). Holmes's analysis culminates with a discussion of Chapter Thirteen in the *Biographia* which "summed up seven chapters of argument, and defined for the English-speaking world the Romantic concept of creativity" (410). Coleridge's work is crucially influenced by his unacknowledged reading of A.W. Schlegel and for Holmes this reading and the resulting plagiarism become "one of the most exciting narrative drives of the *Biographia*" (402); Holmes suggests that Coleridge may deliberately have sought to draw his reader into his plagiarism, "leaving clues and begging for understanding" (402). What seems to be particularly important for Holmes is that such ideas, albeit influenced by other eighteenth-century writers and therefore open to accusations of plagiarism, were being made accessible by Coleridge to the general reader:

Coleridge made such ideas familiar, indeed famous, for the ordinary reader. Moreover he wrote them as a practising poet, and he brought them to life as part of his own intellectual and spiritual journey. (411)

Also the early chapters of the *Biographia* are autobiographical: “with the arrival of Wordsworth, the *Biographia* bursts into life” (381) and becomes “essentially a long dialogue with Wordsworth himself.... [a] passionate conversation, or collaboration, by other means” (385). Holmes is concerned here with a personal study; with the influence of others on Coleridge’s life and work, not critical textual analysis. His concern is with the life of the poet and how he transformed this life experience in both his reading and writing life, translating the ideas of others and making them accessible to a wider readership, and with the pivotal nature of his friendship with Wordsworth. But, on the other hand, this is a blatant case of the biographical fallacy, in which Holmes is determining the meaning of Coleridge’s writing based on the biographer’s point of view about his life. In his search for the figure under the carpet Holmes wants to look from within both Coleridge’s life and work to understand him and the nature of his creativity. The ideas, the style, fall away, get pushed to the margins.

Holmes’s work has to some extent been influenced by other psychoanalytic perspectives. In the case of Shelley and Coleridge, this includes the poets’ relationships with their mothers, their sexual relationships and their search for a father figure amongst their peers. Both men came to resent their mothers; they both adopted triangular relationships – Shelley with his wife, Mary, and her step sister Claire Clairmont, and Coleridge with Wordsworth and Sara Hutchinson; and both became to some extent dependent on a more dominant mentor and poet, Byron in the case of Shelley and Wordsworth in the case of Coleridge. I am not suggesting that Holmes writes psychoanalytic case studies but that he has been influenced by psychoanalysis, as has Edel; in his biography of Shelley, Holmes notes that “Certain unusual qualities in Shelley’s juvenile work *do* show up through the

psychoanalytic screen” (*The Pursuit* 31) and in his second volume of his biography of Coleridge he comments that the *Biographia Literaria* “In a Freudian sense [can be thought of] as a “talking cure”” (*Darker Visions* 378). While working on another study, however, of the photographer Felix Nerval, Holmes realized the limits of psychobiography: “I was thus, in a way, committed to psychoanalyzing Nerval for myself ... And as the months went by ... I become more and more convinced that was exactly what could *not* be done, and that I had reached the limits of the biographical form” (*Footsteps* 264). Holmes does not write psychobiography and here he acknowledges the limits of the literary psychology envisaged by Edel: “the study of what literature expresses of the human being who creates it” (*Stuff of Sleep and Dreams* 12). So, Holmes could be said to have responded to biographical theory published in, and influential during, the 1980s, although Edel’s use of psychoanalysis was developed before the advent of Theory in the late 1960s and 1970s. A forthcoming discussion in this chapter will suggest that traces of late twentieth century historiography in Holmes’s work relate to contemporary approaches from the 1970s and 1980s, the work of Hayden White and Ira Nadel are examples discussed in particular. Both types of biographical theory enable Holmes to write his own version of Romantic biography.

### **Inner and Outer**

Another aspect of Holmes’s Romanticism which can be set within a wider context is his suggestion that the “power of human association with physical places and objects was perhaps the foundation of biography” (*Darker Reflections* 7). This foundation can be understood as the relationship between a biographical subject’s outer and inner life. Recent criticism highlights the way that biography makes connections between outer and inner experience. As Susan Tridgell suggests:

Accounts of the biographical subjects' bodily and mental experience ... can be incorporated into the narrative in such a way that they reveal what may have helped or hindered the achievements of the subject, altered the way in which he or she perceived the world (as well as his or her self conception) and affected the way the world perceived and impacted on the subject (55).

Kenneth Johnston takes this view further and argues that "biographies draw the attention ... to the material life behind ... imagination, to events experienced by the writer and to the particular physical or psychological characteristics which shape any writer's response to his or her world" (139). Holmes uses the outer world to illuminate the inner life. It is the inner life that takes priority and his approach is rooted in Romanticism. In his biography of Shelley, Holmes writes that: "The notion of the mind as an unexplored cave, a bewildering labyrinth through which the explorer must risk his search for a personal identity, was to fill [Shelley's] poems, his notebooks and his prose speculations.... The image of the journey, especially the subterranean journey, constantly recurs in this respect" (*The Pursuit* 65). One way that Holmes understands this subterranean journey, however, is to set it "as vividly as possible in its immediate physical setting" (*The Pursuit* xvii). In his biography Holmes writes about the constant movement in Shelley's outer life, as he lives in many different places in England, and then Italy, and as he searches for places to write, sometimes away from his home, in the countryside, or in a place of quiet retreat. "I have emphasised Coleridge's physical presence as much as his metaphysical one" he writes, "he seemed to learn as much from landscapes as from literature; as much from children's games as from philosophic treatises; as much from bird-flight as from theology" (*Early Visions* xv). Coleridge, as he travelled to Malta, according to Holmes, mused "on this strange difference between human and natural geography, how human associations form our landscapes and boundaries far more than nature herself" (*Darker Reflections* 7). Holmes describes what he believes is Coleridge's

philosophy: “a model of the engagement between the conscious forward drive of intellectual effort (‘propulsion’), and the drifting backwards into unconscious materials (‘yielding to the current’), constantly repeated in a natural diastolic movement like breathing or heartbeat. This is how creativity actually works: a mental (ultimately spiritual) rhythm which arises from the primary physical conditions of the natural world” (398). It is this Romantic notion of the dynamism between reason and imagination, and the material and inner worlds, that Romantics believe gives rise to creativity, and I would argue that it is this dynamism that Holmes, as a Romantic biographer, seeks to understand, seeing it as at the core of Coleridge’s inner life as an artist.

There is a powerful trope in Holmes’s biographical writing which reflects his Romantic, ontological focus: the mirror. According to M.H. Abrams, the Romantic period was one in which the mirror as a symbol of creative imagination was being replaced by the lamp – in which poets sought to illuminate areas previously in the dark, areas behind or beyond the material world reflected in the mirror. But the trope of the mirror was also used to create a connection between the Romantic love of nature or the outer world, and the evolving ‘science of the mind’. Coleridge describes his love of nature in a letter to George Dyer, 10 March 1795: in “the country, all around us smile good and beauty, and the images of this divine nobility and beauty are miniaturized on the mind of the beholder as a landscape on a convex mirror” (*Romanticism* 450). Coleridge was one of the first serious hill walkers and in another letter he explains how the landscape “has all the visionary intensity of a prose poem, the bleak wilderness of the outer landscape faithfully mirroring the wilderness within” (*Early Visions* 291). In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), Shelley writes that, “Every man’s mind is ... modified by all the objects of nature and art; by every word and every suggestion which he ever admitted to act upon his consciousness; it is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected” (*Romanticism* 866). In a notebook Shelley wrote:



If it were possible that a person should give a faithful history of his being from the earliest epochs of his recollection, a picture would be presented such as the world has never contemplated before. A mirror would be held up to all men in which they might behold their own recollections and, in dim perspective, their shadowy hopes and fears<sup>18</sup>. (*The Pursuit* 292)

Holmes suggests that the “most difficult, and in effect the most metaphysical idea in Shelley’s analysis, is the idea of the writer as a mirror of the future” (*The Pursuit* 585). Reflecting more generally on biography, Holmes notes that the

power of certain lives to draw endlessly repeated reassessments ... is a peculiar mystery. It suggests that they hold particular mirrors up to each succeeding generation of biographers, almost as the classical myths were endlessly retold by the Greek dramatists, to renew their own versions of contemporary identity. Each generation sees itself anew in its chosen subjects. (*Footsteps* 19)

Holmes has developed this idea of the mirror in different ways in relation to biography. Here he is discussing Samuel Johnson’s biography of his contemporary Richard Savage: “It is as if the clear, glass window of ‘objective’ narrative suddenly becomes reflective and mirror-like, so we continually glimpse a ‘subjective’ image of Johnson himself superimposed upon the story-surface.... The biography invents Savage as a kind of demonic *alter ego*, a version of what Johnson himself might have become had he been less resolute or less intellectually gifted in those harsh, early years of literary apprenticeship” (*Dr Johnson & Mr Savage* 25). In another example, as Holmes follows in Shelley’s footsteps, he travels to Italy where the poet lived for the last years of his life. As he becomes closer and closer to his subject “my outward life took on a curious thinness and unreality that I find difficult to describe. It was almost at times as if I was physically transparent, even invisible.... I gazed into mirrors above small

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<sup>18</sup> Original source is Lee Clark, David ed. *Shelley’s Prose: or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy* (1966) New Mexico Press

washbasins with no plugs and did not see myself properly” (*Footsteps* 136). As these passages suggest, mirror imagery is very much alive in Holmes’s writing and used in a variety of ways: to reflect the relation not only between inner and outer worlds but to suggest a relation between biographer and subject. This is not a simple reflective process but one which suggests that our images of others and ourselves are intimately connected across time and place.

Fifteen years after the publication of his biography of Shelley, Holmes again comments on his journey through the poet’s life, which he sees as “a kind of ethical mirror, in which we can see ourselves and our lives from new angles, with sudden force” (*Sidetracks* 375). Holroyd draws our attention to this process of biographical self-seeing or self-seeking when he writes that he believes “that the literary biographer can stretch out a hand to his subject and invite him, invite her, to write one more work, posthumously and in collaboration.... We know the value of dreams and fantasies, the shadow of the life that isn’t lived but lingers within people .... ‘The dead call to us out of the past’” (19). Holmes describes the relationship between the biographer in the present, and the subject from the past as “‘a handshake across time’ ... It confirms our need to find the self in the other, not always to be alone” (*Sidetracks* 198). In the ‘Afterword’ to the second volume of his biography of Coleridge, *Darker Reflections* (1998), Holmes concludes that:

there is a particular kind of silence which falls after a life like Coleridge’s and perhaps it should be observed.... Coleridge’s life continues in one’s head, and mixes with the sounds of one’s own existence, and starts up again somewhere else in other hands with a different interpretation. (*Darker Reflections* 561)

What Holmes seems to be suggesting is that biography, what he has called a handshake across time, is a genre in which we are especially prone to see the other in relation to ourselves and vice versa; the intensity of this process can make it very difficult for the

biographer not to lose sight of himself, especially in cases in which the handshake is also “an arm-wrestle, even if a friendly one, like most lively marriages” (“Inventing the Truth” 20).

But can a biographer ever reach an understanding of his biographical subjects’ inner lives, reaching into his or her unconscious? Paul John Eakin in his work on autobiography makes an important distinction between an understanding of the self and the nature of identity. He suggests that the self is a “more comprehensive term for the totality of our subjective experience” (xiv), whilst identity alludes to “the version of ourselves that we display not only to others but also to ourselves whenever we have occasion to reflect on or otherwise engage in self-characterisation” (xiv). Perhaps biography can describe versions of identity but can never fully understand any one self. Holmes leaves himself open to criticism when he suggests that it can.

### **The Essential Process of Biography**

Holmes’s approach to the question of biography’s relation to fiction reflects the concerns of recent historiographic theory. As Tridgell suggests, “the sense of the self we get from biography is strongly affected by the way the biography is written” (31), and in reading biography “the fascination may lie as much in the way the tale is told as in the biographical subject” (31). If Holmes’s approach to narrative and storytelling is questioned by critics of biography on the grounds that it privileges form over content<sup>19</sup>, it might also be praised on just those grounds, in particular by theorists of history such as Hayden White, whose views have influenced the biographer and biographical theorist Ira Nadel.

Holmes’s first biography *Shelley: The Pursuit*, was published in 1974 and in the early 1970s Hayden White was already publishing his work on the nature of narrative in historiography. As the editor of a journal issue in 1970, focusing on the nature of literary

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<sup>19</sup> Evidence of these criticisms is discussed in detail in a later chapter on reviews of Holmes’s biographies.

history, White suggested that historical knowledge is based on written texts about historical events and that “the distinction between the [literary] text and the context dissolves, not in the interest of pollution of literature by life, but the reverse, the reconciliation of consciousness with its proper object, man himself” (“Literary History” 185). In other words, writing becomes a discourse about the relationship between man’s emotional and inner experience of life – which determines how an event is recounted – and the event itself.

For Ira Nadel, extending White’s view, a biographer is “a creative writer of non-fiction” (*Fiction, Fact and Form* 11). In one of his more controversial statements Nadel describes biographies as “authorized fictions” (100): as quoted in Chapter Two, “the aim of biography is not so much to convey the ‘facts’, which it linguistically cannot do objectively, but to present an attitude, perspective or point of view regarding those ‘facts’. It accomplishes this through its rhetorical and linguistic properties, most noticeably in its use of literary tropes” (208). I am suggesting that Holmes’s approach to biographical writing has some connection with Nadel’s theories and that those theories reflect aspects of his Romanticism.

Nadel’s view of biography is influenced, like Holmes’s, by “the powerful nature of Romantic biography as practised in the Victorian period. Where allegiance to the portrait or vision of a subject takes precedence over fact ... it also shows the powerful, personal control the biographer has over his subject, a control that manipulates, shapes and even aligns the life” (91). This quotation is taken from Nadel’s 1984 study of the genre in which he writes at length about the biography of Charles Dickens by John Forster. Nadel sees Forster as a biographer who helped establish the professional status of the genre. Nadel believes that Forster’s successors “sustain the profession of biography through innovative as well as authoritative presentation of material” (99); “each biography of the same individual has a different story to tell not because the facts differ but because the plot structures available to, and employed by, the biographer differ. The ways of telling a life-story are not numbered”

(103). For Nadel “no life can ever be known completely” (100), an assertion which then leads Nadel to conflate biography with fiction, arguing that the life of a biographical subject and a character in a novel are “as much creations of the biographer, as they are of the novelist. We content ourselves with ‘authorized fictions’” (100). In support of this view, Nadel discusses a novel by Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), a satire of biography which, according to Nadel, “contains a theory of biography” (140) and “shows that theory at work” (140):

*Orlando* shows how the limitations of biography can be overcome by the creative writer. The subjects of *Orlando* are the possibilities and potentials of biographical form. It is quintessentially biography as revolution ... the biography vitalizes the form of biography through its synchronic narrative, figurative language, shifting presentation of personality, scenic variety and vibrant language. (140)

But *Orlando* is a novel<sup>20</sup> and Nadel has blurred the distinction here between fiction and nonfiction to an extent which suggests that he is prepared to invent material in biography, or that he will allow “invented” biography into the genre.

Holmes understands his writing, as does Nadel, as experimental: “Writing as an experimental biographer myself” (199) he says in *Sidetracks*. He also argues that a study of non-fiction narrative, and how it differs from fiction,

offers one of the most fascinating and fruitful of all possible fields for students. It is, I think, different from the conventional discipline of historiography. All good biographers struggle with a particular tension between the scholarly drive to assemble facts as dispassionately as possible and the novelistic urge to find shape and meaning within the apparently random circumstances of a life. Both instincts are vital, and a

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<sup>20</sup> To be more precise, this novel is a very early example of biographical fiction, a novel in the form of a biography which draws on the life of her friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West.

biography is dead without either of them. We make sense of life by establishing 'significant' facts, and by telling 'revealing' stories with them.... It is, of course, tricky terrain, the impossible meeting of what Woolf herself called 'granite and rainbow'. ("The Proper Study" 17)

Here Holmes is making the same connections between fact and fiction that interest Nadel. In an example from the biography of Shelley, Holmes describes the work as

a form of modern epic, in which speed of action, colour and movement, travel and the sense of poetic adventure, predominate over everything else.... The open-ended nature of biography is one of its mysterious attractions.... Biography is only scientific in the sense that it is experimental: it tests one version of the facts. But all good biography must do more, must risk more, if it is to live for any time in the imagination. It must finally transcend facts and documentation, and risk an artistic style and form appropriate to its age. (*Shelley* ix-x)

Holmes here anticipates Nadel who argues that "the Romantic mode of biography, [is] characterised as the commitment to image rather than facts, with imagination more dominant than the record" (*Fiction, Fact and Form* 89). Holmes's perspective also has some links with the work of White who argued in 1973, a year before Holmes's biography of Shelley, that "the style of a given historiographer can be characterized in terms of the linguistic protocol he used to prefigure the historical field prior to bringing to bear upon it the various 'explanatory' strategies he used to fashion a 'story' out of the 'chronicle' of events contained in the historical record" (*Metahistory* 426). But it is important to add that Holmes does not lose his commitment to presenting facts accurately and he understands the dangers of presenting speculation as fact. In *Footsteps* he re-evaluates his suggestion that Shelley had a child with one of his servants, Elise, and he understands and respects the complex distinction between fact and fiction: "where the biographical narrative is least convincing its fictional

powers are most reduced. Where trust is broken between biographer and subject it is also broken between reader and biographer” (175). There are a number of other ways to understand Holmes’s work and two will be considered in the remainder of this chapter.

Firstly, I would draw attention to issues of intention in Holmes’s biographical writing and consider whether the supposedly objective voice of the narrator reflects the view of the biographer. Perhaps there is a need to distinguish between the narrator, the voice telling a subject’s story, and the actual biographer who is external to the written text. John Halperin proposes that we, as readers, come to “an undeniable fact about all novels: they are told by an implied author, who is created by the biographical author and is necessarily part of the formal experience of reading the novel. You cannot talk about form without talking about authors” (162). Benton relates Wayne Booth’s notion of this implied author, the writer’s ‘second self’ with his own idea of an ‘inferential biographee’, the subject in a biography, “a version of the author that the biographer makes available to the reader, created primarily from the texts” (74). I would suggest that in addition to the ‘inferential biographee’ in a biography the narrative voice is a construction created by the biographer, and that at times we are aware of the voice of the implied biographer or narrator, a construction by the biographer who created the narrative, as well as the voice of the biographical subject; as Wilson Snipes suggests, “the biographer both consciously and subconsciously projects the persona or implied character he has adopted for the specific biographical work, his version of narrator, dramatist, critic, etc” (237). It is not the voice of the actual biographer we hear in biography, but a narrator constructed in biographical narrative.

Another aspect of Holmes’s biographical writing is the use to which his distinctive voice as narrator is put. It has been criticized on two grounds: that it pretends to omniscience and identifies too closely with the voice of the subject. For example, John Barrell suggests that “Holmes’s eagerness to identify with Coleridge throughout the two volumes of this

biography sometimes seems to persuade him that he can speak Coleridge's mind for him, and, when he does, the effect is uncanny: two minds with a single thought" (20). Similarly, Tridgell, invoking Foucault, argues that a biographer with an allegedly compassionate and empathetic approach may in fact just be asserting control and power over the subject and adopting a superior, condemnatory and demeaning position towards them: "something which seems compassionate (understanding) is a mere route to an end (judgment, condemnation). It is this dynamic which many commentators have suspected to be in operation in biography" (146). Tridgell continues, that "Foucault's suspicion of seemingly compassionate endeavours echoes Nietzsche's suspicion of pity" (150), as "a form of condescension, of a will to power" (152). She considers whether a biographer can have sympathy for his or her subject without taking a superior stance: "In a somewhat critical comment in a review of Richard Holmes's *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* [the historian and biographer Rosemary] Ashton writes: Holmes 'still prefers to look with Coleridge rather than at him'. For Ashton, despite her generous appreciation of Holmes's skill, his tendency to share the outlook of his subject is something of a drawback. However, Holmes's approach, his tendency to rejoice in the wildest flights of his subject ... allows for the kind of fellow feeling which Nietzsche endorsed. Nietzsche commented that 'shared joy, not compassion, makes a friend'" (155). Tridgell is seeking to explore "whether compassionate and condescending attitudes can be successfully distinguished from each other; whether knowledge, by granting power, is always inclined to corrupt compassion into condescension" (156). One of the ways that Holmes seeks to avoid condescension, when seeking empathy, is to enable the voice of the subject to be heard, as well as his own voice.

Holmes defines biography as "an art of human understanding and a celebration of human nature" (*Footsteps* 25), and he believes that the study of biography provides an opportunity "above all, *to exercise empathy*, to enter imaginatively into another place,



another time, another life” (‘The Proper Study’ 17). He seems to agree that he shares a common voice with his subject and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, one way he explains this connection with his subject is in his use of the trope of the mirror. But he also argues that he has attempted “to set Coleridge *talking*, to tell his story through his own magnificent – and constantly humorous – flights of phrase and metaphor. I have tried to make his *voice* sound steadily through the narrative, and indeed in the end to dominate it” (*Early Visions* xvi). To do so he has not only quoted Coleridge’s own words extensively but has given the narrator a Coleridgean voice, which, on the one hand, may put him in danger of empathising too closely with the subject’s voice, and on the other, of condescension. This is a risk Holmes seems prepared to take.

One way that Holmes’s narrative strategy experiments with the voice of the implied biographer is through the use of footnotes, as he explains in the introduction to Volume One of his Coleridge biography:

Despite the traditional form of my narrative, I have tried certain biographical experiments ... I have attempted, from the start, to set Coleridge *talking* ... Secondly, I have introduced a series of footnotes – if the reader should care to pause for breath – which does not so much add information in the traditional scholarly way, as initiate another level of speculation, a third perspective – besides those of Coleridge and his narrator. They are intended as a sort of down-stage voice, reflecting on the action as it develops, and suggesting lines of exploration through some of the biographical and critical issues raised. They are, I suppose, my humble equivalent of Coleridge’s marginal “gloss” to the *Ancient Mariner*. (*Early Visions* xv, xvi)

This downstage voice is understood here as another aspect of the implied biographer in action. For example, in one footnote in the *Age of Wonder*, Holmes comments on the impact of venereal disease in eighteenth century Tahiti, noting that “It was soon accepted that the

Europeans in general were responsible” for a disease “which devastated the Pacific populations over the next two generations” (18). Tahiti was, he comments in the footnotes, “Literally a Paradise Lost, in the sense that venereal disease, alcohol and Christianity had combined by the early nineteenth century to destroy the traditional social structures of Tahiti and to transform its ‘pagan’ innocence forever” (59). Holmes also comments on Banks’s collection of specimens: “The psychology of collecting, ordering and naming specimens could also be seen as a form of mental colonising and empire-building” (49). It is important to note that Holmes also writes about Banks’s response to colonialism in the main body of this book, although Holmes’s decision to move some of the narrator’s voice to the footnotes risks underplaying some important aspects of his analysis. There is a danger that one narrator’s voice is heard in the main text whilst a different tone is heard in the voice commenting downstage in the footnotes; but not all readers may hear both voices.

The notion of the voice of the biographer can also be considered in the context of postmodern theory about the nature of haunting and ghosts in narrative. Holmes describes the growth of an imaginary relationship with a non-existent person, or at least a dead one: “In this sense, what I experienced ... was a haunting.... an act of deliberate psychological trespass, an invasion or encroachment of the present upon the past, and in some sense the past upon the present. And in this experience of haunting I first encountered – without then realizing it – what I now think of as the essential process of biography” (*Footsteps* 66), the gathering of facts and “the creation of a fictional or imaginary relationship between the biographer and the subject” (66). I would suggest that this could be understood to mean that the relationship is between the biographer and the subject of the biography, both are present in the process of biographical writing and it is within narrative that this relationship exists. And I would argue that this is an approach reflected in Ira Nadel’s work: “the signature of the biographer is as important to recognize as that of his subject. The former signs himself

through literary means, the latter through the record of his life” (*Fiction, Fact and Form* 4). Derrida argues that in reading the work of others one creates a counter-signature, which is a confirmation of the first signature, but also an opposition to it. He argues that “when I write I say something else, there is something new, something different and that’s the way I understand fidelity ... you cannot simply repeat the same thing, you have to invent, to do something else if only to respect that alterity of the other” (*Life After Theory* 10). And in creating this counter signature, “we have to do with ghosts ... the narrator, as a narrator, is a survivor, because when you tell a story, especially when you sign a confession, you already write something which in principle might survive. The story, and the true subject of the story – and the book now, because the two men are dead, is a survivor. It is a ghost story in a certain way” (16). In the case of biography, perhaps this means that the biographer can never just get the subject talking, as Holmes suggests, because there will always be the presence of the narrator, in the text. The actual biographer can only leave the ghost of his writing in the written text. Holmes notes how he becomes possessed by Shelley and those around him, and he knows this possession “would end in disaster ... But I suspended belief... It is, as I later found myself writing, more a haunting than a history; it is peculiarly alive and potent” (*Footsteps* 135). In his introduction to his biography of Shelley, Holmes emphasizes his recognition that he sees this haunting as part of Shelley’s importance as a representative figure of his time. It is something he does not write about at length in the main body of the biography and one wonders if he would have been less open to criticism if he had. Here is the relevant passage from the introduction:

I have redrawn the critical estimate of both Shelley’s major poetry and his prose, and attempted to set it as vividly as possible in its immediate physical setting, and against the disturbed and excited political period which brought it into being, and which flashed up through the years towards our own. This last is a comparison that I have

never presumed to mention, since that has not been my task. But it stands there for anyone who has eyes to see, ears to hear, or heart to feel, sometimes so close that Shelley's life seems more a haunting than a history. (*The Pursuit* xvii)

I would argue that Derrida's approach suggests that biography can be seen as a 'counter-signature', not a definitive version of a biographical subject's life, but a version created by each biographer which the reader can agree with or not depending on his or her perspective – Derrida believes that:

A counter signature is this strange alliance between following and not following, confirming and displacing and displacing is the only way to pay homage, to do justice. (*Life After Theory* 15)

The process of Shelley haunting his time and Holmes in turn haunting the life of Shelley in the twentieth century reflects the process of ghostly narratives explained by Derrida. And in this discursive practice Holmes creates his own signature as he responds to Shelley's life in the context of his own:

The sources of [Shelley's] inspiration-the political and moral radicalism, the visionary poetry, the new openness and risk in emotional relationships, the passionate belief in "love" as the law of life – all these things corresponded to what I had myself seen and witnessed, what my whole generation had seen and witnessed (but how quickly they were forgetting) in Britain and Europe during the Sixties. These parallels, I felt, I could not use explicitly; I could not follow step by step quite as in the old, innocent Stevenson days. But because the parallels existed I had a unique chance to follow and reinterpret Shelley's life almost from the inside. I felt I held the password. (*Footsteps* 143)

The nature of the biographer's counter signature and haunting in biographical narrative are key themes in the next chapter. Both Holmes and Lee are concerned with issues of authorship

but I would argue that Lee's response to biography's critics has moved away from the ideas about biography reflected in the work of Romanticism and even Edel and Nadel and now has closer connections with New Historicism and Feminism.

Although Holmes is a biographer predominantly influenced by Romanticism, aspects of his work can be understood in the context of recent postmodern historiography. Unlike Tomalin though, and Lee, as we shall see, he embraces the charges against him. It is not so much that he is unaware of the criticisms of literary theory as that he rejects them – though at times he seems to accommodate them, as with his forays into group biography, within more traditional biographical practice.

## Chapter 5

### Hermione Lee and the Biographer as Reader

Hermione Lee began her academic career as a lecturer in England at Liverpool University (Lecturer, 1971-1977). She then taught at the University of York from 1977 to 1998. From 1998-2008 she held the Goldsmiths' Chair of English Literature at Oxford, the Chair once held by Richard Ellmann and was a Fellow of New College. In 2008 Lee was elected President of Wolfson College, Oxford. In addition to critical and biographical studies of Phillip Roth, Elizabeth Bowen and Willa Cather, she has written two major biographies, *Virginia Woolf* (1996) and *Edith Wharton* (2007). Unlike Claire Tomalin who has maintained a writing life as an independent biographer outside academic life, and Richard Holmes, whose writing life has included independent writing and a period working in a university, Hermione Lee, an academic writing popular biography, has had a foot in both camps throughout her career. Her biographies reach general audiences yet clearly respond to some of the challenges made by academic critics, encompassing aspects of theory in her work, without identifying wholly with any particular one. In a manner which gestures towards Barthes and Derrida, she sees the biographer as both reader and writer, openly acknowledging that no work can be definitive or objective, that each biography is a “reading”, a product as much of “writing” as of fact or new fact. As Nina Cook suggests in her study *Contemporary Female Biographers and the Biographical Paradigm* (2004), Lee transforms biography, influenced by Virginia Woolf’s approach to the genre. Cook argues that Lee, in looking at Virginia Woolf’s work as a biographer, and her writing about biography, “establishes a shared self-consciousness about the genre and the problems facing the biographer” (116). Cook also suggests that “Lee is a writer, writing about a writer who,

through her investigation of the act of writing, changed the very act forever” (117). This is a process that needs a kind of courage in the biographer, the courage of her subject.

On the first page of her biography of Virginia Woolf Lee expresses her fears about biographical writing:

There are many times, writing this, when I have been afraid of Virginia Woolf. I think I would have been afraid of meeting her. I am afraid of not being intelligent enough for her. Reading and writing her life, I am often afraid ... for her. (3)

In an essay published shortly after the appearance of the biography, “Am I Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” (1998), Lee explores the nature of this fear as it becomes a trope to explain biography’s relationship to its critics. She quotes criticisms of the genre in Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman* (1994): “Malcolm arrives at a metaphor of fear for the whole act of biography, fusing together the shameless biographer, the subject’s dread of biography, and fear of the act of writing itself” (224). In the essay Lee discusses her fears that she would “take the wrong notes, or miss the key document, or lose or forget what I had found, or not be able to work the thousands of details into a readable narrative” (229). Lee was afraid of Woolf and sought to understand Woolf’s fear, what Woolf herself called her apprehensiveness. In the end Lee believes that in Virginia Woolf’s life of writing “there is value in danger: ‘apprehension’ means extreme responsiveness as well as nervous dread” (234). And the “woman writer ... must not be afraid to say what she thinks” (234); fearlessness “is an important word for Virginia Woolf when she is talking about other writers” (235) and “Courage and fear are vital counter-forces in Virginia Woolf’s writing about biography” (235). Lee found Woolf’s approach encouraging and took pleasure “in thinking about the relationship between the word ‘encouragement’ and the word ‘courage’” (236), concluding that “It might be possible for biography to be about fear, as well as unafraid” (237). The biographer has to have courage to write about the fear she has of her

subject, and perhaps all writers need courage, particularly when they seek to challenge orthodoxy.

Lee sees the nature of authorship as essential to understanding the genre of biography. I want to suggest that for her the key questions about authorial intention and autonomy are not only about the interplay between the material and writing life, seeking an understanding of the present in the past, or making imaginative connections between diachronic and synchronic evidence, but are also about the narrated identity of both biographical subject and biographer. In other words, what version of a life can a biographer create on the basis that it is constructed by a biographer whose voice as narrator will always be present? First of all I will consider how Lee makes connections between life and work and I want to suggest in the next part of this chapter that literary biographies can be understood as ghost stories – stories concerned with the ghosts that we find within narrative and in our reading. And as noted in Chapter Four, in these stories we find the ghost not only of the biographical subject, but of the biographer herself, authorial voices in conversation within the text. This notion of the biographical subject and the biographer as ghosts promotes the view that biography is collaborative, a conversation and a process of exchange between different voices, in this case the ghostly voices of the biographical subject and his or her biographer. This conversation is often associated with places, in particular houses and homes, visited by the ghostly presence of the biographical subject and his or her biographer.

### **Rewriting a Life**

Lee's work reflects the strategy of other contemporary biographers who have described their approach as an attempt to understand this interplay between life and work. In his biography of William Shakespeare, Stephen Greenblatt aims "to tread the shadowy paths that lead from the life he lived into the literature he created" (12) and to "understand who



Shakespeare was, it is important to follow the verbal traces he left behind back into the life he lived and into the world to which he was so open” (14). In a paper about his biography of the poet John Clare, Jonathan Bate makes clear that he is not arguing in his biography that any actual event is directly reflected in a particular poem but rather that “personal experience and family folklore shaped his poetic preoccupations and tone” (“John Clare” 6). And for his biography of Tom Stoppard, Ira Nadel decided that “the life might illuminate the works despite Stoppard’s disavowal of connections. My goal was not to analyze the plays but to use them as signposts marking stages in the subject’s personal and artistic growth. They became steps in his progress as an individual and writer, fulfilling Virginia Woolf’s declaration that biography should be “the record of things that change rather than of the things that happened”” (*Modern Literature* 20). This record, of the changing interplay of life and work, is disclosed as much by traces, shadowy paths, signposts and a process of shaping, as by direct reflection on how personal experience is fictionalized, or real people become characters.

In both of her biographies Lee explores the extent to which the lives of Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf can be understood as an interplay between their time at and away from their desks, or bed in the case of Wharton who often wrote in her bedroom. Her biography of Edith Wharton opens with the connection between life and work: “This, then, is the story of an American citizen in France.... Who could never be done with the subject of America and Americans.... Between 1897 and 1937 Wharton published at least one book almost every year of her life.... In almost every one of them there is a cultural comparison or conflict, a journey or a displacement, a sharp eye cast across national characteristics” (*Edith Wharton* 8). At times in her biography Lee discusses specific examples of where the life and work may transform each other, although specific events may not be directly attributed to specific

pieces of writing. She is interested in what was on her subjects' minds at the time of writing particular works. For example:

It would be a travesty to suggest that all the stories of failed love, sexual treachery and claustrophobic marriages Wharton published in this period [1907 – 1912] issued from her relationship with Morton Fullerton. These themes were already her specialty. The qualities that make Wharton a great writer ... were the product of years of observation, reading, practice and refinement, not a love affair.... Yet this messy, difficult time in her private and professional life saw some of her finest work. (346)

In Edith Wharton's fiction, Lee clarifies, "Nothing is lost or wasted from the past" (564): *The Custom of the Country* "is utterly unautobiographical, though traces of her life are in it everywhere" (424); *The Age of Innocence* "makes a kind of autobiography, though, as usual, personal emotions are carefully distanced and dressed up" (562); and the story 'Roman Fever' "is one of the best examples of the indirect, rich and surprising ways in which she makes use of her own experiences" (718). But Lee maintains throughout this biography that one of Edith Wharton's "great strengths as a writer is her ability to generalize from her own condition. She never wrote about her own situation for public consumption, except in one much-revised highly circumspect paragraph in *A Backward Glance* about her husband's illness. But she used her own experience ruthlessly as fictional material" (360).

In her biography of Virginia Woolf, Lee suggests that her subject's adult life was partly influenced by what happened to her in her childhood, including the death of her parents and the alleged sexual abuse by her brothers<sup>21</sup>:

When she came to explain to herself in her late memoir what made her a writer, she described it as a process of *welcoming* or finding valuable these shocks ... The shock

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<sup>21</sup> In her biography, Lee writes about the alleged sexual abuse of Woolf by her step brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth: "she had to deal from early childhood with some unexplained realities ... a sexual assault by Gerald Duckworth in very early childhood" (125); "The story of George's social induction of the Stephen girls is mixed up with the story of his sexual interference with them.... George's behavior features prominently in her account of her life" (154).

is followed by an immediate desire to explain it.... So the making of art, in reaction to the blows of life, is both an active, controlling process, in which she orders reality by 'putting into words'; and a passive, self-abnegating process, whereby she recognizes that what she is making is part of something pre-existing and universal. (173)

Other aspects of Woolf's childhood informed her work: *The Years* "made an X-ray of her childhood as a prototype of Victorian patriarchal repression" (96); "*The Waves* ... is the only one of her novels which is not ostensibly concerned with family life or inheritance" (269); "*Jacob's Room* is as full of [her brother] Thoby Stephen as *The Voyage Out* is of Virginia's painful adolescence, and *Night and Day* is of her sister's character, her family past, and her decision to marry" (436), although "Any display of naked autobiography is carefully suppressed" (436). Lee is emphasizing throughout in this biography that her subject's writing is a form of rewriting her early experience and I discuss some examples of this in the next section of this chapter. Zachary Leader has suggested that understanding the different written versions of a writer's work is an exploration of the self of the writer, and that when an editor has to choose between these versions, "what is being pondered is the nature of the self or person, and the relative claims of truth, beauty, history and authorship" (74). I would suggest that it is possible to understand biography as a search for the rewriting of the subject's self, given that "Everyone can be said to change over time. Just as every alteration to a poem, however minor, can be said to make the poem 'new'" (Leader 131), and similarly as revision in a writer's life and work are "multiply motivated" (Leader 315), so is the need to constantly rewrite the same or similar experiences of a particular life in a range of different narratives. As Holmes has argued, "no biography, however good, is definitive. It is important to understand how a series of biographies on the same subject shape and change a reputation through time. To learn about biography, you must view it comparatively" ('Whatever is Happening in Biography' 133). For example, Lee discusses two of the different images

created of Jane Austen, who was portrayed in the biographical picture painted by her family as “a shining light in her own home” (‘Jane Austen Faints’ 69); Lee suggests that “Critics wanting to construct a more robust, less sanctified Austen have to push hard against the genteel, nostalgic version” (72) and in comparing Claire Tomalin’s and David Nokes’s<sup>22</sup> biographies of Jane Austen Lee proposes that they provide “a riveting example of biography as a relativist process of conjecture, invention, intuition, and manipulation of the evidence” (85). I would argue that this relativist process in biography is also a form of rewriting a life; we may question the authenticity of some biographical versions but as we compare these different versions, as readers and scholars of the genre, we come to understand how these alternative versions of a life have been rewritten.

A powerful example of how Virginia Woolf rewrites her life is in her accounts of her parents, particularly her father and his influence on her writing throughout her life: “it is probable that her writer’s life was driven by the desire to say ‘look at me’ to those two exceptional parents” (95). Lee believes that Woolf “used [her father] for her politicized arguments against patriarchy in *The Years* and *Three Guineas*. When she began planning *To the Lighthouse*, in which he was at first going to be the central figure, she called it ‘The Old Man’” (68); her sister Stella’s relationship with Leslie “became the basis for Virginia Woolf’s analysis of the tyranny and hypocrisy of the Victorian fathers. It established the fundamental framework for her feminism” (138); and “Much of how she lived and wrote was formulated in reaction against him” (72). Lee understands that the process of experiencing and rewriting does not necessarily take a chronological and linear form. For example, she writes about how Woolf uses her experience of hallucinations and delusions in her work: “It seems possible that she may have refashioned the frightening unintelligible mental language of her hallucinations ... into a more meaningful ensemble, either immediately afterwards or

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<sup>22</sup> Nokes, David. *Jane Austen: A Life* University of California Press, 1998.

long afterwards” (197). Although she is careful to point out that her writing may not reflect “exact narratives of her raw experience” (197) or have “the kind of coherent biographical meanings which they invite” (197), nevertheless, how Virginia Woolf rewrites her life is crucial to Lee’s approach.

Lee also suggests that Virginia Woolf’s “life can be seen as a complicated range of performances” (*Virginia Woolf* 529) and one way that the performance is enacted is through her writing, as in the rewriting of her childhood experiences and traumas. As discussed at the start of this chapter, Lee also makes use of the notion of life-writing as in itself performative<sup>23</sup>; rather than seeking a transcendental understanding of her subjects, she suggests that traces of their inner selves may be left in their writing. Virginia Woolf explored an idea of the unstable self and “if she could find herself out only by indirection, then it was a great deal harder for other people to pin her down. Most of what went on in her internal zoo was invisible to the outsider” (529). Bate suggests that in “writing a life of Shakespeare’s mind that looks ‘before and after’ ... We must by indirections find directions out” (5) and Lee makes a similar point about making connections in relation to Virginia Woolf’s mental illness: “to treat her fiction only as therapy is to empty her writing of all content except curative, to depoliticize it and to narrow its ambitions. Madness is not her only subject” (194), and anyway, “we cannot, I think, be sure what ‘caused’ Virginia Woolf’s mental illness. We can only look at what it did to her, and what she did with it” (199); in other words, by such indirections we can find out something about what how her life is transformed in her writing.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Eakin focuses on the nature of writing in the genre and suggests that critic Phillipe Lejeune, a leading twentieth century French critic of autobiography, conceives autobiography “as the performance of a kind of writing” (xxvi): “for Lejeune ... the creation of the text is primary; autobiography is literally a writing; and the corollary of this textualisation of the genre is a performative conception of the content of a life story in which the relevant events are equivalent to the cumulative series of a writer’s engagements in the autobiographical act” (xxvi). I would argue that in biography a biographer similarly explores the performative conception of a subject’s life.

Lee's interest in her subjects connects with a wider focus on the lives of women and feminist concerns, and this is obviously important in any reading of Virginia Woolf's life: "the pleasure of reading was not simple or separate, but bound up with Virginia Woolf's politics and her feminism" (417). In Wharton's writing Lee argues that it is "women ... who have to conceal their feelings, suffer betrayal and social punishment, compromise their lives and lose what they love" (186); Wharton "is not easily described as a feminist writer. But *Summer* is particularly bitter about female oppression" (507). So Lee is also concerned with the interplay between the professional and the private in her subjects' lives and argues that their writing explores concerns of wider social and political relevance.

### **Ghost Stories**

Virginia Woolf's writing is filled with the ghosts of her past, in like manner, Virginia Woolf becomes a ghost in Lee's own writing. Lee's approach in her biography suggests a relationship in which the author as subject and the biographer are both writers, a feature of, and a construction in, their own writing; and in conversation, haunting each other. As authors write they can become characters in their writing, and we as readers find the character of the narrator constructed by the biographer in her biographical writing. It is not the voice of the actual biographer we hear, but her ghostly presence as a writer in conversation with her dead subject. In other words, assuming that we cannot know the intentions of the actual biographer, the narrative voice in a biography is a construction created in writing, which offers a version both of the biographical subject and the biographer.

It must be significant that in her biography of Virginia Woolf Lee writes, at five key moments of opening and closure in the text, about ghosts and haunting: at the beginning and end of her first chapter, called 'Biography'; in the opening of the second chapter; at the end of the last chapter; and finally at the end of an additional section, called 'Biographer'.

A first chapter with the title 'Biography' sets the scene for Lee's approach and discusses Virginia Woolf's concerns about life-writing. Lee notes in the very first line of this biography that biographer and subject share the same dilemma:

'My God, how does one write a Biography?' Virginia Woolf's question haunts her own biographers. How do they begin? (3)

Lee not only opens by acknowledging a relationship between the biographer and her subject, both of whom are asking the same question about biography, she also reaches out as a biographer to her peers, 'they', emphasising that she shares this dilemma with biographers across the genre. The rhetorical question also draws attention to an understanding of biography as a conversation; a conversation between Virginia Woolf and her biographers. Lee writes later in the biography that after her death Katherine Mansfield "haunted [Virginia Woolf] as we are haunted by people we have loved, but with whom we have not completed our conversation, with whom we have unfinished business" (400). Biography becomes an example of the unfinished business we as readers and biographers have with writers who have influenced our life and times.

At the end of this first chapter, Lee suggests that Woolf makes "lives vivid through scenes and moments" (20) from her past:

This, she tells us, is how her autobiography is written. Again and again, she marks the past by returning to the same scenes, the rooms, the landscapes, the figures in her life, like the ghosts revisiting their haunted house in her story of that name. Back she goes to the scenes of childhood: the blind tapping on the window of the bedroom at St Ives, the lighthouse beam going round, the sound of the waves breaking on the shore. (20)

Then chapter two opens with the house from her childhood, Talland House, to which Virginia Woolf returns as an adult with her siblings, Thoby, Vanessa and Adrian after the death of both of their parents. Lee notes Virginia Woolf's diary entry after this visit: "We hung there

like ghosts in the shade of the hedge, & at the sound of footsteps we turned away” (21) and Lee goes on:

This revisiting would ... be the source of the emotion and the plot of *To the Lighthouse*, the novel that comes from this house.... Like Lily Briscoe conjuring up Mrs Ramsay, we can superimpose, on to the image of the four young Stephens standing outside the hedge in the dusk, the image of twenty years before. We can take the ghosts, turning them back into children .... (22)

There then follows Lee’s extensive biography, which ends, in chapter 40, with Virginia Woolf’s suicide. Lee does not write a separate chapter on Woolf’s afterlife, but closes with a comment which predicts what is to come, and the very last lines of the formal biography, the narrative, are:

As she had once said of her own dead friends, she went on living and changing after her death: ‘So we discuss suicide, and the ghosts as I say, change so oddly in my mind; like people who live, & are changed by what one hears of them.’ (767)

But Lee’s biography does not end here, there is a further section, which is not identified as a chapter and labelled 41, nor is it identified as an appendix, it just has the title ‘Biographer’. Aspects of this last section reflect the conversation at the opening of the biography, which discusses Virginia Woolf’s own approach to life-writing, as well as the closing lines of the biography. In this last section, ‘Biographer’ Lee responds directly to a key aspect of Virginia Woolf’s approach to life-writing, which seems to reflect Lee’s own: she comments that “I have been reading a Virginia Woolf who has greatly changed.... She herself, as I’ve said in this book, was intensely aware, from her own reading and theorising of biography, of how lives are changed in retrospect, and how life-stories need to be retold.... Posthumously, it feels as if she has generously, abundantly opened herself up to such retellings, as if in an echo of her joking phrase to John Lehmann: ‘You are hereby invited to



be the guest of Virginia Woolf's ghost.' Virginia Woolf's story is reformulated by each generation" (769). Lee's approach emphasizes that someone's life happens within narrative as their story unfolds in retrospect; both guest and ghost come together in this story.

The closing paragraph of the final 'Biographer' section of Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf discusses Lee's experience of actually visiting the places where Virginia Woolf lived, which Lee argues gave her an opportunity "to see and do some of what she did" (770). Lee closes her book with these last lines, directly echoing the end of the opening 'Biography' chapter:

I stand in the garden [of Talland House], feeling like a biographer, a tourist, an intruder.... No convenient ghost is going to appear, casting her shadow on the step. However, looking away from the house, over the buildings of the twentieth century, at the distant view from this island look out, I can allow myself to suppose that I am seeing something of what she saw. My view, in fact, seems to have been written by Virginia Woolf. The lighthouse beam strikes round, the waves break on the shore. (772)

In the penultimate sentence Lee highlights the connections between her view of the house and her reading of Virginia Woolf's work and life. In part this is an understanding of biography as a shared way of seeing, of making connections across time between individuals and the wider context in which they live. No convenient ghost of Virginia Woolf may appear on the step but perhaps she will in her novels and in Lee's biographical narrative.

Sean Burke proposes in his writing about the 'death of the author' that:

work and life commute through a channel which can be traversed in both directions and not ... only in the direction author-to-text.... The relationship between work and life is one of a ceaseless and reactive interplay in which neither life *nor work* has any claim to necessary priority.... The author can be at once both dead and alive. The task

here accomplished is that of returning the author to the house without shaking its foundations, quietly, inconspicuously, an author who can leave by the front door only if he enters from the back: the uncanniest of guests. (31)

Burke develops his argument in the context of biography and proposes that:

when we read biography or autobiography we are reading, as everywhere we must, nothing other than writing. And for all its banality, this is a necessary point, in that it provides the most direct route or return for the author as a biographical figure in criticism. The writer's (auto)biography is writing, and there is therefore no reason to either valorise its significance in the act of interpretation, or to outlaw its deployment on the grounds that it is somehow an improper form of textuality. (122)

Max Saunders also puts the notion of guest in the context of biographical criticism and argues, echoing a trope used by Edel, that:

It is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the text, in his text, but he then does so as a 'guest'. If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet ... He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work ... the *I* which writes the text, it too, is never more than a paper-*I*. ("Ford, Eliot, Joyce" 167)

Saunders suggests in the same essay that "literary biography should describe a dual relation between life and writing, understanding the writing as a source for, as well as the outcome of, the life" (161). The author's house is understood here by Burke as a form of narrative, writing a novel for example. If we consider another form of narrative, biography, perhaps we can understand Burke, Saunders and Virginia Woolf to mean that the biographer becomes an uncanny guest, an invited guest, or perhaps uninvited guest, who is another writer, writing and retelling her own version of Virginia Woolf's ghost and exploring the interplay between Virginia Woolf's life and writing, as well as the interplay between the life and writing of the

biographical subject and her biographer. In other words, Lee is making it explicit that the relationship between the biographer and subject is within narrative and that because of that we do not really know either of them, only their construction in the biographical narrative and as such they become ghostly, not material, forms.

Richard Holmes, as pointed out in the last chapter, also describes the growth of an imaginary relationship with his subjects; in *Footsteps*, a metanarrative which explores his journey as a biographer, he explains that “what I experienced ... was a haunting ... an act of deliberate psychological trespass, an invasion or encroachment of the present upon the past, and in some sense the past upon the present. And in this experience of haunting I first encountered – without then realising it – what I now think of as the essential process of biography” (*Footsteps* 66), the gathering of facts and “the creation of a fictional or imaginary relationship between the biographer and the subject” (66). Holmes’s approach here reiterates that this is a relationship within narrative, both subject and biographer are present in the process of biographical writing. The relationship can be understood as part of a narrative discourse made up of both the writing and reading lives of subject and biographer.

Holmes even goes so far as to see a ghost during one of his journeys in search of his subject. He writes about his pursuit of Shelley as he retraces his steps by visiting the houses where Shelley lived in Italy. At one house, Casa Bertini, Holmes takes a photograph and months later he looks at it and sees a ghost of a boy:

It was a boy, aged between three and four, almost dwarfed by the trees, up to his ankles in leaves, and with a pair of dark eyes fixed on the camera. A faint tingling sensation passed over the top of my scalp. I felt I was looking at a photograph of little William, Shelley’s dead son. (*Footsteps* 149)

Holmes was “astonished by the presence” he had “conjured up” (150) but moments later realises that the actual boy who really was in the photograph lived in the house at the time of

Holmes's visit. But for Holmes the photograph becomes "almost a symbol of what my biography should try to achieve. It should summon up figures like a magic photograph plate, and hold them through time, at ten foot to infinity, with the soft shock of recognition, perfectly alive" (150). Whilst both Lee and Holmes have understood biography as a form of haunting, there are some subtle differences in their approach. Holmes here seems to be suggesting that he can summon up his biographical subjects and bring them to life. On the other hand, Lee's approach is more suggestive of a conversation and of different ways of seeing, as Virginia Woolf and Lee draw on their experience, and on their reading and writing lives. Lee's biographical portraits seem to be less fixed than a photographic plate because the view we have changes in the process of rewriting. In Lee's writing it is not so much that the subjects come to life as that within the narrative we can trace their ghostly presence.

Both Holmes and Lee understand their subjects' lives in part through visiting the houses where they lived. Lee suggests that *To the Lighthouse* "is a kind of ghost story, a story of a haunted house.... It is also a twentieth-century post-war novel, concerned with the English class structure with the social and political legacies of the war as much as with family memory" (482). As narrator, Lee proposes that for Virginia Woolf "looking at houses and their solid objects is, in fact, an eloquent method of 'thinking the matter out', the matter of what use the traditional Victorian answers – the old mental furniture – can be for the next generation" (45); "Virginia Woolf's lifelong argument with the past took its central images from the leaving, and the memory, of the Victorian house. When, in the 1920s and 1930s, she devises a metaphor for a younger generation of women setting out on their professional lives, it is – famously – of a room. This modern room – a bedsitting room, a college room, and a soundproof room – is the substitute for the rooms which women have lived in in the past: drawing-rooms, nurseries, kitchens, rooms with no privacy ... But the recommendations for modern life – and modern writing – in *A Room of One's Own* can't quite shake themselves

free from the old rooms and old houses” (*Virginia Woolf* 47). Lee goes on to say that “In her adult life, the memory of the family house fills her with horror, but also with desire. She returns to it repeatedly in her thoughts and in her writing; she recognizes to the last day of her life that she is part of the fabric of a family history and character, and carries in her own life traces of ‘a world that has gone’” (49); Talland House where she spent memorable days in her childhood “is where she sites, for the whole of her life, the idea of happiness.... Happiness is always measured for her against the memory of being a child in that house” (22); and a London home, Hyde Park Gate “came to stand for all of Victorian domestic life and for the whole family history” (35). But recent critics are uneasy about the relationship biographers and other literary tourists have with the houses haunted by their literary subjects.

In a study of literary tourism, Nicola Watson suggests, influenced by Derrida, that at one extreme of the practice “tourists actively seek out the anti-realist experience of being ‘haunted’, of forcefully realizing the presence of the absence” (*The Literary Tourist* 7). In her view the “readerly impulse to locate author and text within real places may have been born out of the extended nineteenth century’s love-affair with biography and with realist fiction, but it is still very much with us a century later” (201). And in a related study edited by Watson, Julian North suggests that in the nineteenth century:

In many ways biography encouraged and sustained the practice of literary tourism. It was one of the most significant means of establishing authors as celebrities and disseminating their homes and habitats to a wide audience.... investing these homes with iconic significance and making them desirable and consumable spaces. (49)

She argues that “the claim of literary biography as well as of literary tourism to offer the public authentic insight into an author’s life was a seductive one... [which] might ... offer the reader of biography or the literary tourist a powerful illusion of companionship with genius”

(60). The homes of her subjects certainly litter both Lee's biographies and become an important trope in her writing about the events of their lives. Harald Hendrix comments that:

Edith Wharton once compared a woman's life to 'a great house full of rooms'. This is a tempting framework for any biographer, and one that Wharton's latest, Hermione Lee, uses to striking effect in her massive new book about the American writer, famous for portraying Old New York's "Gilded Age".... As Hermione Lee suggests, the essential tension in Edith Wharton's work stems from her being held in a world in which she remains ever the watchful stranger.... Wharton also appreciated the idea of a house full of rooms as a metaphor for what lay mysterious and unexposed to the outside world about her own life. (20)

Hendrix proposes that, "Writer's houses ... are a medium of expression and of remembrance" (1). In her biography of Wharton, Lee suggests that Wharton's views on writing fiction "were very like her views on house design.... Novels, like houses, should have a firm outline, a sound structure, and a quality of inevitableness" (*Edith Wharton* 182). As Mark Bostridge suggests, Wharton "appreciated the idea of a house full of rooms as a metaphor for what lay mysterious and unexposed to the outside world about her own life" (20). In an essay about Edith Wharton's houses, Lee also argues that "to visit her houses is to understand her character and her way of life" ("A Great House Full of Rooms" 31) and in her biography Lee is clear that "Whenever Wharton writes about the decoration of houses, she is writing about behavior and beliefs" (28). Lee also suggests that Edith Wharton can be understood through her gardens: "the same mighty energies, appetite for planning, eye for detail, and cogent vision, went into her gardening as into the writing of fiction, and as they had into her war-activities and travels.... She was a writer and a gardener, and her gardens became, for those who saw them and heard about them, as admired as her books" (527).

Books and libraries can also inform a biographer's understanding of a writer's life. Lee proposes that in the case of Edith Wharton, who took great care with the binding and presentation of her books, her "novels and stories are full of book-lined studies and discriminating collectors. Private libraries are the place where friendships are made" (132). Lee believes that her books "do not just provide evidence of her life-story, they were also protagonists in it, and the equivalent of old friends" (670).

I would suggest critics of literary tourism need to listen to the conversation in Lee's biographies more carefully. I repeat what Lee writes of her visit to Talland House, Woolf's childhood home: "I can allow myself to suppose that I am seeing something of what she saw" (772). Perhaps this is not so much about 'realizing the presence of the absence', creating an illusion of companionship with genius, nor is it about 'summoning up' a ghost from the past to bring it to life; it seems to be more about a shared way of seeing and about making connections. Lee has explained that in her view "Biography could be said to resemble philosophy in its aim. As Wittgenstein describes it, and as Ray Monk argues, that aim is to arrive at 'the kind of understanding that consists in seeing connections'." (*Introduction* 104). These connections can be made across time, in rewriting the story of different lives which change in the retelling, and by seeking to understand the connections and associations with places and houses, the outward manifestations of someone's life, their character and experience. In her writing about these places, the biographer can leave traces of her conversation with the ghostly presence of her biographical subject. If Lee sees Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* as a kind of ghost story, a sort of haunted house, perhaps Lee's biography can be understood in the same way.

## **The Biographer as Reader**

Some critics of biography do not share the perspective that biographers are writers and constructions in their own narrative. Catherine Belsey opens her paper, “The Death of the Reader”, with her view that “Life is not always the source of art” (201). She cites as proof a novel which is based on the author’s reading of books and viewing of films, in other words, on her understanding of intertextuality. Belsey argues that this proves that “the primary source of writing is other writing” (201). She is especially critical of biography which “substitutes the relation of events and feelings for the difficult work of textual, historical, and linguistic interpretation. Narrative stands in for analysis; critical biography takes the place of serious reading.... Biographies of authors ... propound in addition an account of the creative process, reaffirming the popular assumption that fiction and poetry transcribe experience” (202). She argues that what was important about Barthes’ pronouncement that the author was dead was not primarily the position of the author, “but any critical institution that persisted in closing down interpretation by invoking an Author as guarantor of the true reading. Critical biography supplied the text with ‘a final signified’, limiting the possibilities of meaning by identifying it with a secret, outside the work and outside language, but known to the critic in possession of the Author’s life records” (203). Belsey goes on to write that “Critical biographers are obliged to root textuality in experience in order to have a tale to tell: a record of their subject’s reading does not make much of a story” (210). In Belsey’s view, “Critical biography is not an aid to reading but a substitute for it.... Biographical explanation pronounces the death of the reader” (212). I would make two points in response to Belsey’s analysis. This study has already argued that biography does not necessarily seek any form of definitive version of a life which is therefore open to interpretation by each reader; biographers are indeed readers creating their own counter-signature in a biographical narrative and other readers then go on to read this version of a life, which they may compare



with others they have also read, creating their own version of a life in doing so. Also, Lee is fully aware that her subjects' reading is a crucial part of their biography.

Catherine Parke suggests that for Virginia Woolf biography itself was "clearly more than just a kind of writing....It was the way she read and wrote, the way she thought about life, and her manner of interrelating all three of these activities" (78). Parke argues that Virginia Woolf

emphasises that for the common reader, as for the critic, reading is fundamentally a biographical-historical activity that involves not merely being "in the presence of a different person ... but ... living in a different world" (in 'How Should One Read A Book?' *Collected Essays* 2.2). For Woolf, then, the critic is of necessity a kind of biographer. (79)

In her biography of Virginia Woolf, Lee fully endorses this approach and comments that "Her work is permeated with her reading ... Her mind is full of echoes" (411). Lee is clear that "A great mass of reading finds its way into [Virginia Woolf's] prose, and what strikes one most is the exuberant and careful way in which she works through influences towards her own tone of voice" (169); "Reading, quite as much as writing, is her life's pleasure and her life's work" (402), and "Books are a school for character, she argues, because they change (like people) as we read them, and change us as we read them. Books read us" (403). And above all, "she wanted reading and writing to infiltrate each other" (413); "As a biographer, as a critic, or as a novelist, she felt there is a distinct way for a woman to read, and write about, other women's lives. *A Room of One's Own* is a history of a woman reading" (*Virginia Woolf* 416); and, finally, Lee argues that "the pleasure of reading was not simple or separate, but bound up with Virginia Woolf's politics and her feminism" (417). In an article about her research on a forthcoming biography of the novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, Lee writes about looking at her subject's possessions and then thinking about her writing life: Penelope

Fitzgerald's books "provide the entry point to a remarkable writer's reading life" ("From the Margins" 2). Belsey's view that critical biography cannot be an aid to reading may be true for some biographies, but in Lee's biographies the reading lives of her subjects and of the biographer, and the relationship between them, are very much part of her biographical writing.

Lee understands her own role as a reader; she opens her biography of Woolf with a comment that she has been "Reading and writing her life" (3). Lee's comments can be understood in the context of Allen Hibbard's approach which proposes that

The dynamic between biographer and subject resembles the hermeneutic process described by Paul Ricoeur, in which the configuration of the work is refigured in the act of reading. This collaboration is made possible by the writer's and reader's shared notions of language and time (represented through narrative). In a similar fashion, a subject's life is refigured and given definition by the biographer. Ricoeur argues that the meaning-making activity is characterized by interaction, not independent activity. (33)

For Lee, as for Woolf in her approach to biography, it is a process of reading as well as writing, as the subject's life and writings are informed by her reading, and in turn the biographer reads her subject's life and work – which we as readers then go on to read.

Pite, in the context of Romantic biography, discusses Liz Stanley's concept of a more "active reading" in biography. He draws attention to her view of authorship; she argues that biography is a process which is "firmly lodged within and is symbiotically related to the 'intellectual autobiography' of the biographer: how she understands what she understands" (*The Auto/biographical I* 177). To get to grips with this process Stanley suggests that we need "a more active readerly engagement with such writings, one which does not take on trust sources of fact and information, but rather recognizes their role in the construction of

particular views of the ‘self’ they present” (255). She understands that *all* readers, including those who are reading her work, then go on to interpret in their own way the reading and writing of texts: “*your* reading/consumption of written products is itself an active process with further ‘change’ implications for thinking” (177). Pite sees her perspective as advocating a form of biographical writing

which is reflexive – presenting the reader with the writer’s uncertainties and changes of mind – and open-ended – allowing several interpretative possibilities to remain for the reader to choose between ... The complexity of the biographical subject will by this means survive into the biographical account and the sociality of the subject be reflected in the process of interpretation; in other words, the biography will be written so that its subject can be read differently by a potentially infinite number of different readers. (*Romantic Biography* 177)

In response to this analysis Pite argues that the writing of the Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular, can in fact be understood as works in conversation with others. To this extent, as he notes, their work is social but based on a notion of separate but interacting authors. This study would suggest that a different response to Stanley might be to remind her, and Belsey, that biographers are readers, as indeed are all writers of nonfiction, and that they engage in an ongoing process of authorship, of rereading and rewriting which other readers then go on to reflect on and reread. For a biography to offer infinite possible readings it would perhaps need to be more like a traditional scholarly tome which merely lists everything known about someone’s life, although inevitably there would be gaps in the list and/or the historian would have to leave out some details to make the text manageable and not replete with repetition. When others ask why other versions of a life are needed, perhaps one response would be to suggest not only that different versions are required for different generations who bring their own perspectives, but that reading and writing are not closed

systems and no one writer, of fiction or nonfiction, can read and write a definitive version of a life – every version written by a particular reader has potential value, whether others agree with that version is a different point.

\*

In her biographies Lee explores questions about the nature of authorship in biography from a number of other related perspectives and three will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter: she considers writing as what she calls ‘making up’ or ‘making over’; she explores the impact of Feminism and New Historicism on the genre; and she argues that her approach is not based on one dominant reductive theory, but is engaged in a philosophical discourse which understands the infinite play of signification in her subjects’ lives.

### **‘Making Up’ and ‘Making Over’**

First of all, Lee describes her practice as a biographer as:

a process of making up, or making over. The New Oxford Dictionary of English (2001) includes in its definitions of ‘making up’, to compose or constitute a whole (of parts); to put together or prepare something (like mortar) from parts or ingredients; to arrange type and illustrations on a page; and to concoct and invent a story. ‘Making over’ has two meanings: ‘to transfer the possession of something to someone’, and to completely transform or remodel something’ (such as a person’s hairstyle – or nose). Since biographers try to compose a whole out of parts (evidence, testimony, stories, chronologies) and arrange it on the page, since they appropriate their subjects and usually attempt to create a new or special version of them (so that we speak of Edel’s James or Ellmann’s Joyce), and since they must give a quasi-fictional, story-like shape to their material (or no-one will read them), these terms seem to fit. But pulling

against ‘making up’ or ‘making over’, both of which imply some forms of alteration or untruth, is the responsibility to likeness and the need for accuracy. (*Body Parts* 28)

Lee has developed this approach in conversation with her subjects within her biographical writing. In her biography of Virginia Woolf, Lee writes about Woolf’s approach to reading which “takes the form, often, of what she calls ‘making up’. You make up the author as you might make up the person opposite you in the railway carriage ... Much of the art of reading is ‘not reading’, but a fantasy carried on behind and during reading. As she reads, half her mind is on the writer’s life, making up the story behind the story. And when she returns to an author ... she will ‘make him up a little differently at every reading’. When the book is closed, and the ‘after reading’ begins, ‘making up’ turns into ‘making whole’” (*Virginia Woolf* 413); “‘Making whole’ is, again partly a passive process ... but it also involves the effort to communicate, to say what she thinks about the book” (414). In Wharton’s novel *Ethan Frome* (1911), Lee suggests the “narrator is like a biographer. He collects the evidence, listens to the different versions, and makes up his own story of the past from what he can gather. The characters’ imprisonment in their private tragedy pulls against the narrator-biographer’s tendency to turn them into a case history of New England life” (*Edith Wharton* 379). Discussing an unfinished novel by Wharton, Lee suggests “The phrase ‘making up’ is hers, and she uses it to describe the most essential activity of her childhood” (*Edith Wharton* 13); “In Paris, the stories she was ‘making up’ were based – as they would be in future years – on the lives she imagined for ‘the ladies and gentlemen who came to dine’” (14). In her example from *Ethan Frome*, and in her shared understanding with her subjects of the process of ‘making up’, Lee challenges notions that the literary biographer can easily distinguish the lived life and the writing life. Indeed making up is an ongoing process of writing and reading between the subjects and their work, and between the biographer and her subjects. Lee’s comment about *Ethan Frome* also suggests that writing about a life is not a

matter of either a private story or a public, more representative one, but rather it is both. Lee argues that literary biographers “usually try not to split the performing, public, everyday self off from the private writing self, but to work out the connection between them. That is really the whole point of literary biography” (*Short Introduction* 102). And in making these connections the biographer creates a ‘make over’ or version of her subject.

### **Feminism and New Historicism**

Hermione Lee has commented that biography “is never just the personal story of one life. It always has political and social implications” (*Short Introduction* 63), and in her case there are echoes in particular of New Historicism in her work.

Stephen Greenblatt’s description of self-fashioning suggests that criticism can embrace the life of an individual if he or she is understood within wider social, political and cultural codes and interpreted within both contexts:

... self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one’s own identity, the experience of being moulded by forces outside one’s control, the attempt to fashion other selves.... Self-fashioning is ... the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment. (*Self-Fashioning* 3)

He calls this “practice a more cultural or anthropological criticism ... its proper goal, however difficult to realize, is a poetics of culture. Such an approach is necessarily a balancing act- ... Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction” (*Self-Fashioning* 5). To undertake such an analysis, Greenblatt continues, in a passage already cited, it is not possible to draw on thousands of figures, so “from the thousands, we seize

upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need” (7). I am suggesting that Lee’s writing resonates with Greenblatt’s approach as she looks at how Woolf constructed her own identity and how biography itself helps to construct social, cultural and individual meaning and identity: “It seems possible that [Virginia Woolf] may have refashioned the frightening unintelligible mental language of her hallucinations” (*Virginia Woolf* 197) and she comments that “early 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature was criss-crossed with a spider’s web of life-writing. ‘Self-fashioning’ took many forms” (*Short Introduction* 54). Clearly Lee considers Virginia Woolf as one of the arresting figures Greenblatt is writing about.

Lee is interested in the extent to which a handful of figures, always women in her writing, can serve as a medium through which we can understand their times and the needs of today: she has written recently that “Even if the various pitfalls in writing about women ... have become much less common, the challenge remains of how best to tell the stories of the increasing number of women in the public sphere” (*Short Introduction* 129). She notes that biographies of women tend to focus on their private lives, while those of men on their public identity. Lee constructs a version of her subjects which highlights their role as representatives not only of their gender, but also their time. And she interrogates the tension between their public and private selves.

In the case of Virginia Woolf, Lee suggests that what “she does with her life, and how and what she writes, has to be read as a feature of the dramatic shifts in English cultural history between the 1880s and the 1930s” (262); and similarly, for Edith Wharton, “The links between her Italian writings, her interest in the decoration of houses, and the harsh, witty analysis of her society she was starting to make in her stories and novels, were part of a complex cultural argument about America at the turn of the century” (*Edith Wharton* 120). Jonathan Bate, in his writing about Shakespeare, shares Lee’s biographical ambitions: “we

need to ask both ‘what was it like *being Shakespeare?*’ and ‘ ‘what are the most telling ways in which Shakespeare’s works embody – or rather ensoul – the world-picture of his age?’ We have to shuttle back and forth between the Shakespearean mind and what has been usefully called ‘the Shakespearean moment’. Shakespeare’s uniqueness must be held in balance with his typicality” (*Soul of the Age* 4). Lee’s vision for Woolf and Wharton may be that they too can ‘ensoul’ their own culture, as well as make connections between the past and the present of the biographer.

One example from Lee’s work which serves to illustrate this analysis is the opening of the Woolf biography. As Lee herself argues, for any biography “the opening moves set up the whole approach” (*Introduction* 125). A close reading of the first page of Lee’s biography of Virginia Woolf, in the chapter titled ‘Biography’, sets the scene for Lee’s vision. To being with, there are these sentences, cited earlier: “‘My God, how does one write a Biography?’ Virginia Woolf’s question haunts her own biographers. How do they begin?” (3). Lee not only opens by acknowledging a relationship between the biographer and her subject, both of whom are asking the same question about biography, she also reaches out as a biographer to her predecessors, ‘they’, emphasising that she shares this dilemma with practitioners across the genre. The rhetorical question also draws one’s attention to an understanding of biography as a conversation. Lee’s conversation is not only with Woolf, she makes a direct reference to readers of the biography a few paragraphs on: “I have noticed that in the course of any conversation about this book I would, without fail, be asked one or more of the same four questions ... It began to seem that everyone who reads books has an opinion of some kind about Virginia Woolf” (3). So, immediately, Lee makes us aware that this is a work not only about one particular writer, but reflects a wider conversation between biographers and general readers. Interestingly the same questions she is asked only relate to Virginia Woolf’s personal life: “Is it true she was sexually abused as a child? What was her madness and why



did she kill herself? Was Leonard a good or wicked husband? Wasn't she the most terrible snob?" (3). Some readers may understand Woolf not as a person or writer, but rather as a disembodied concept based on who they think she was and what she came to represent; those who do not even read her books have an opinion about her, "even if derived only from the title of Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" (3). Lee draws attention here to the extent to which we bring our own mythologised view of her to our reading of her private life and what we think we know about it. The reading which treats her as someone everyone is afraid of, is really a reading about ourselves and the fate of our own lives; this is what really terrifies us.

There is another clue about Lee's approach in this first page. She has written elsewhere that a

still lingering difference between biographies of men and of women is revealed by the matter of naming. Lives are no longer being written of 'Miss Austen', 'Mrs Woolf', or 'Mrs Gaskell'. But because biographies of women have for so long been more protective and intimate than those of great men, a biography of a famous English women novelist might still refer throughout to Jane or Charlotte, whilst famous male English novelists are not usually called Charles or Anthony. Some biographers of women deal with this issue by switching from forename to surname, or from childhood nickname to married name, depending on whether early or later life, personal or professional matters, are being referred to. (*Introduction* 129)

On this first page Lee's subject is referred to as Miss Stephen, but predominantly she is Virginia Woolf, not Virginia, Mrs Woolf or Woolf. This way of naming Virginia Woolf is repeated in every chapters of this biography. Virginia may be used, but when it is this is usually because the narrative is referring to the voice of someone who knew her, a friend or relative who would, of course, have called her by her first name. But otherwise Lee's subject

is known as Virginia Woolf. Why? Perhaps because Virginia Woolf was a person but a writer first and foremost and Virginia Woolf is her name as a writer and as a representative of the voice of other women writers from her time to the present. We do not really know her but we believe we know who she came to represent. Interestingly, we tend to refer to writers and biographers, as in this study, by their surname, Dickens, Milton and Shakespeare are obvious examples. Clearly, Lee would want to avoid any confusion with Virginia's husband, Leonard, but her use of naming her subject Virginia Woolf throughout her biography seems more significant. Lee understands that in the case of Virginia Woolf "myths have been made" (3) about whom she really was, and our understanding of her is embodied in her name. By implication these myths are created in part by readers as well as biographers, and, referring back to Greenblatt's view of self fashioning, certainly by forces outside Virginia Woolf's control. We all refer to Dickens, but do we not always refer to Woolf, as a woman as well as a writer her first name becomes as important to us as her surname.

Lee goes on in this first chapter of her biography to explore Virginia Woolf's approach to life-writing:

Biographers are supposed to know their subjects as well as or better than they knew themselves. Biographers set out to tell you that a life can be described, summed up, packaged and sold. But Virginia Woolf spent most of her life saying that the idea of biography is – to use a word she liked – poppycock. In her essays and diaries and fiction, in her reading of history, in her feminism, in her politics, 'life-writing', as she herself called it was a perpetual preoccupation. (4)

And she identifies key themes in Virginia Woolf's thinking:

For her the crucial problem in the biographies that her generation has inherited is the tug between fact and fiction and the difficulty of getting to the 'soul'.... If you put Virginia Woolf's scattered writings on biography together, you can see her making up

some rules. There must be these sharp moments, caught from the context, the subject's social world. But also there must be movement and change: generalisations, fixed attitudes, summing-up, are fatal.... The biographer has to be a pioneer, going 'ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions'. So 'There are some stories which have to be retold by each generation.'(11)

Also, for Woolf biography should concern the relationship "between public and private, official and secret lives" (12) and in particular when "she writes about biography, she is also writing about feminism.... The inhibitions and censorships of women's life-writing is one of her most urgent subjects" (13). Lee is clear that "Her life-story enters and shapes her novels (and her essays); she returns again and again to her family ... 'In fact [comments Virginia Woolf] I sometimes think only autobiography is literature – novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you or me.'" (17). In an autobiographical essay, 'Sketches of the Past', Woolf makes "lives vivid through scenes and moments" (20):

'Representative scenes' from her life seem to endure as 'realities', waiting for their moment to 'flood in' to her consciousness. So 'scene making is my natural way of marking the past.' This, she tells us, is how her autobiography is written. Again and again, she marks the past by returning to the same scenes, the rooms, the landscapes, the figures in her life ... Back she goes to the scenes of childhood .... (20)

These perspectives reflect themes in New Historicism and in Lee's own biographical writing, including the use of scenes and moments, the connection between her subjects' private lives, in particular their childhood, and their work, the experience of women writers and the connection between literature and writing and a writer's social and material life. These themes are explored in Lee's biographies, making a connection between biographer and subject, past and present.

After this opening chapter there follows Lee's extensive biography, which ends, in Chapter Forty, with Virginia Woolf's suicide. As noted earlier, this is followed by the section titled 'Biographer', which opens with statements about Lee's own life, statements which echo her comment about the limitations of the traditional form of chronological biography in the first chapter of the biography. The opening of this last section establishes a relationship between the biographer of the more recent past and her subject, yet places this relationship within a wider context: "I was born in February 1948, three years after the end of the war and seven years after Virginia Woolf's death" (768). Lee responds directly to a key aspect of Woolf's approach to life-writing, which reflects her own: she comments that "I have been reading a Virginia Woolf who has greatly changed.... She herself, as I've said in this book, was intensely aware, from her own reading and theorising of biography, of how lives are changed in retrospect, and how life-stories need to be retold" (769). This perhaps can be understood as a redefinition of self fashioning as we fashion ourselves and others in narrative through an ongoing process of rereading and rewriting.

In the opening of her biography of Edith Wharton, Lee's approach again echoes aspects of the sort of self fashioning identified by Greenblatt. The first page of this biography ends with Edith Wharton who is mentioned in the last line of the page, but the page primarily focuses on her parents' trip to Europe in 1848. The opening sentence of the biography sets up important themes for the text as a whole, the relationship between public and private; transnational and American identity; personal wealth and privilege, on the one hand, and ordinary people, on the other; dominant, and revolutionary or emergent ideologies; planned and unexpected outcomes, as when "In Paris, in February 1848, a young American couple on their Grand Tour of Europe found themselves, to their surprise, in the middle of a French revolution" (3). Lee goes on in this first chapter to make connections between the past of

Wharton's parents and her own life and asks how they could be so different and yet so similar at the same time:

Between these nineteenth- and twentieth century American versions of Paris in crisis is the gap of a generation, of historical change, and of widely differing personal knowledge and experience.... She broke with her parents' attitudes and customs ... With prolonged, hard-working, deliberate ambition, she pushed out and away from her family's mental habits, social rules and way of life – of which that 1840s Grand Tour is a perfect example – to construct her own personal and professional revolution.... But in some ways she followed a family pattern. Though she describes them as at bottom all provincial New Yorkers, they were forever Europe-bound.... Perhaps she was unfair to [her father], or unfair to the young man he had been years before her birth .... (7)

Lee makes the point by the end of this chapter that these connections between Wharton's past and present underpinned much of her writing. She wrote in all her novels about "versions of herself as the daughter of her family and her country.... In almost every one of them there is a cultural comparison or conflict, a journey or displacement, a sharp eye cast across national characteristics" (8).

In the opening of her second chapter Lee introduces the concept of 'making up', discussed earlier in this chapter, and her approach continues to echo self-fashioning. Lee comments that the story of Wharton's life is full of gaps and silences, as she strived for privacy in life and in her fiction, yet her work has broader social implications: "Wharton 'made up' versions of herself as a child and of the world she grew up in" (13) and this "making up" "took place in private, but it also connected to the outside world" (14):

‘Making up’ might be a solitary ecstasy but it was firmly linked to the realities of the physical world, to her relationship with her parents, and to the social life which she escaped from in order to ‘make up’, but also used for her material. (15)

Lee then in the beginning of the third chapter makes connections between Wharton and other women writers: “Wharton’s early story is part of a larger plot in the way it reflected her society’s expectations for women of a certain class and type – expectations which would be one of her main subjects” (45). Wharton’s writing is informed by her identity, based on her nationality, her childhood, her class, and by her role as a representative of the wider experience of women writers, in the past and today. Wharton fashioned her own identity and those of her literary characters in the context of wider social forces which were outside her control. She suggests that her subject was indeed privileged and it would be foolish to deny this, nevertheless her individual story has wider significance in the story of women’s lives as writers and at the very end of the biography Lee is disappointed that her subject is primarily remembered for her class, rather than her abilities as a writer, one who fought so hard to raise the voice of women:

Wharton is no longer always mentioned in the same breath as Henry James; in fact she is mentioned (at least in America) more often than he is, now, as an indicator for certain subjects: wealth, social status, old New York”. (754)

Lee implicitly connects Wharton’s past with her own present in the early twenty-first century. The stories of Lee’s subjects can be understood as lives which can ensoul their age and remain relevant to women writers today, although in the case of Wharton she may be seen as more representative of privilege than of the writing experience of women authors and to this extent her life sits slightly uncomfortably within the discursive practice of New Historicism<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt argue that in their version of New Historicism, “While deeply interested in the collective, new historicism remains committed to the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, the transient sketch” (16), but in doing so this single voice in literature has a wider application; they argue that it is important “to imagine that the writers we love did not spring up from nowhere and that their achievements must draw upon a

## Making Connections

Lee's range of narrative strategies reflects her view that it "is not necessary for a biographer to have a theory or a set of general rules about identity – in fact, it can be a disadvantage.... Biographies that apply a specific theory of human behaviour ... to the telling of a life story can retrospectively seem limited or simplifying" (*Short Introduction* 15), because coming "at a likeness will always involve a messy, often contradictory, mixture of approaches" (*Body Parts* 3) and all memorable biographies mix "together many different genres and approaches." (*Short Introduction* 49). For Lee criticism about biography should be less theoretical and more philosophical in approach:

If, in the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's formulation, 'human actions' are 'enacted narratives', if 'we all live out narratives in our lives ...', then 'the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others'. It may be that the validity of such narratives will depend, as in philosophy, on how the story is constructed .... (*Short Introduction* 104)

Other examples of critical writing about philosophy and narrative and their relationship to biography reiterate Lee's position. Susan Tridgell is also influenced by the work of MacIntyre and argues that a biographer does not need to choose between inner and outer experience: "experience is no more and no less limited than the possible interpretations of experience ... people are no more and no less 'infinite' than the number of stories which can be told about them, the ways in which they can be seen" (121). Ray Monk, a philosopher as well as a biographer of philosophers, argues that biographies can explore what

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whole life-world and that this life-world has undoubtedly left other traces of itself" (12); they also argue that New Historicism is concerned "with finding the creative power that shapes literary works outside the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as within these boundaries" (12). And in an earlier book from 1980, Greenblatt argued that "in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 2) and for him "self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functioned without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being moulded by forces outside one's control; the attempt to fashion other selves"(3). So, in other words, the idea of ensouling here is taken to mean that an individual can only be understood within the wider context of their class, cultural background and social position and some biographies can create a version of one life which encapsulates the lives of other like them.

Wittgenstein “described as ‘the kind of understanding that consists in seeing connections.’ What produces this kind of understanding, Wittgenstein says, is a perspicuous representation<sup>25</sup>. Something that he used to illustrate the notion of a perspicuous representation was a Galtonian composite photograph, in which, for example, pictures of several members of the same family might be superimposed on top of one another, allowing one to see the connections and differences between them, to see that these two had the same nose, these three the same eyes, and so forth” (*Poetics Today* 563). This approach allows “us to see things differently ... This does not, however, mean that ‘anything goes’ ... this does not mean that there are no incorrect answers.... some things can be seen in a variety of ways, and it can be up to us how we choose to see them, but this does not mean that our ‘point of view’ turns everything into a fiction; what we see might well be (one of the things that are) really there. And of course, among the different possible points of view, some might be better—more insightful, more coherent, clearer— than others” (567). He proposes that it is not so much, as Susan Tridgell argues, that biographies put forward different arguments about their subjects, because these have to be based on a proposition which “attempts to persuade us to see its subject in a certain way” (567); “To see something in a certain way is not to assent to the truth of a proposition or set of propositions. A ‘point of view’ belongs at the level of meaning, not at that of truth” (567). He explains in a different paper: “It seems to me that the multiplicity of different ways of seeing the things around us is an ineradicable and widespread feature of our lives ... without changing our views about the facts of the matter ... we see something different, even when what we look at is the same thing.... From the fact that there is more than one way of being right, it does not follow that there are no ways of being wrong” (“Objectivity, Postmodernism and Biographical Understanding” 41).

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<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1953) argues that a “perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in “seeing connections”” (122).



Monk argues that it is legitimate to make connections between a subject's private and professional lives, and to see the inner life being revealed in behaviour: "There is such a thing as an inner life, but it will invariably have outward manifestations" ("Philosophical Biography" 10). In so arguing he suggests that biography "is descriptive rather than explanatory and this means that its elucidatory value is perpetually liable to remain elusive and misunderstood" (5). This perhaps gives rise to the fear and related courage that Lee is aware of in her own experience, and that of her subjects. What Monk's analysis suggests is that a biographer has to take the risk of being criticised because she knows that there is no definitive biography and no one way of understanding her subjects' lives. But a biographer can seek to describe connections and elucidate different points of view, without recourse to reductive theory and particular arguments. She can seek out, and describe, connections between biographical subjects' behaviour, work and inner lives, by 'making up' a vision of a subject in a reading of his or her life and work, which is then 'made whole' in the narrative of a biography.

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I would argue that, on the one hand, Lee's biographical practices have been influenced by academic debates, but on the other, that she is interested in a form of nonfiction which explores issues of authorship and a wide range of influences rather than allegiance to one particular theory or discourse rooted in ideology. In other words, she has sought to find a truce between biography and academic critics of the genre in which her reading of her subjects' lives and work reveals the traces of different aspects of literary theory. At the same time, in the process of rereading and rewriting the ghosts of both biographical subject and implied biographer leave their signatures in the biographical narrative.

## Chapter 6

### **Biographers and their Academic Critics: On Tomalin, Holmes and Lee**

Despite the increasing academic respectability of biography, and despite its response to critical and theoretical hostility, reviews by academic critics can still be harsh. There are key pitfalls which a biography should avoid if biographers wish to appease academic critics. This chapter will consider the critical reception of biographies by Hermione Lee, Claire Tomalin, and Richard Holmes in academic journals and the reviews of academics in the quality press. In doing so it is important to acknowledge that academic journals are of course targeted at peers and contributors are not paid, whilst literary journals in the general press reach a wider audience and contributors are paid. Also, it certainly seems to be the case that academics reserve their fiercest criticisms for academic journals read mainly by their peers. Also, I will identify particular factors which help to explain the criticism that Tomalin and Holmes in particular as popular biographers have received from academics.

#### **Hermione Lee: Scholarly Tone and Expertise**

Of the three biographers reviewed, Hermione Lee comes off best in terms of academic judgement; her techniques tend to draw admiration from reviewers. They are interested in the way that Lee subverts the traditional realist narrative often associated with literary biography. Dean Flower in his review of her biography of Wharton in the *Hudson Review*, suggests that a work by Lee has intrinsic value: “Was there really any need for yet another Wharton biography? Well yes, if you are Hermione Lee” (504). But he goes on that this is not just ‘yet another’ biography:

if by that is meant a linear chronological story, which strings together what is known about the person with plausible connective tissue, synthesizing sources of all kinds to

create a single moment-by-moment narrative, replete with crisis and turning points and outcomes. Lee chooses instead to write a series of twenty semi-independent chapters, each focusing on an aspect of Wharton's life and career, sometimes only loosely chronological. (504)

Other reviewers, including Ruth Yeazell, Jean Kennard and Patricia Hoy, also highlight Lee's use of themed chapters in *Virginia Woolf* (1997) and *Edith Wharton* (2007). They comment that both biographies focus on different aspects of Woolf's and Wharton's lives, although reviewers do identify problems with Lee's approach. Julia Briggs, in *Essays in Criticism*, argues that "Lee felt free to abandon conventional chronology in favour of a more thematic treatment" (99) in her biography of Woolf, but in Briggs's view this "can be confusing, as individual anecdotes or quoted passages move backwards or forwards in time" (99). Flower and other critics have expressed some concern about this aspect of Lee's approach; Flower argues in his review of *Edith Wharton* that "Lee's twenty different chapters give us almost that many Whartons. The strategy causes some chronological overlap ... just as it did in Lee's Virginia Woolf biography" (508); for Edmund White in his review of the same biography in the *New York Review of Books*, sometimes "the thematic approach leads to repetitions and a moment of confusion" (40); Michael Gorra in the *Times Literary Supplement* considers that the thematic approach offers "a strangely distorting clarity" (4). There is a certain irony in these responses as the reviewers are criticising Lee for addressing some of their peers' concerns about the genre, namely, that biography should avoid traditional realism and chronological storytelling. It would appear that biographers are open to criticism whatever they do.

However, on the whole, in reviews of her biographies, Lee's scholarly credentials are not in question. Briggs suggests that her biography of Virginia Woolf is "Researched with

immense thoroughness” (100). Briggs identifies particular readers for this biography, all of whom, she seems to think, expect the biography to be long: “The book’s length reflects a desire to meet the expectations of various readers – students, scholars and historians, as well as Bloomsbury aficionados” (100). There is no suggestion here that this is a biography merely for the general reader. But on the other hand, in her review of Lee’s Wharton biography, Ruth Yeazell in the *London Review of Books*, considers its in-depth detail as a weakness: “one wishes this biography were shorter. The long chapters devoted to the less literary sides of her life ... are admirably researched; but the sheer weight of Wharton’s possessions, her money, even her words, can begin to seem oppressive” (18). Yeazell believes that Wharton’s writing just cannot compete with Woolf’s greatness; Lee, suggests Yeazell, “does not try to conceal Wharton’s limitations, but her understandable efforts at fairness, whether to the reactionary politics or the weaker novels, verge on apology” (18). In *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (2009), Lee highlights different aspects of biographical narrative, including a reference to the length of biographies:

All sorts of choices – the fullness or scarcity of footnotes, whether the index includes topics and concepts as well as names, the range and number of illustrations – are part of how the story is told and what kind of readership is envisaged: general or specialist, trade or academic. Length, too, tells us about the approach. Why was this subject thought worthy of 900 pages? Or, why has a big subject been dealt with in 150 pages? What has been left out? (132)

Yeazell’s comments suggest, for this reviewer at least, that Wharton, in Lee’s long biography, is not to be regarded as a ‘big’ subject – that is, an academically serious subject – and does not merit an in-depth scholarly study.

In recognising her scholarly credentials reviewers are also positive about aspects of Lee's narrative and writing style. For Allison Funk in *Papers on Language & Literature*, much of the power in Lee's biography of Woolf "comes from Lee's skill in capturing those 'sharp moments' from her subject's experience" (320) and in "freezing moments from the writer's life" (326). Gorra goes so far as to suggest that in Lee's biography of Wharton, the opening chapters "are as crisp as anything in Jane Austen" (3). The common view amongst reviewers, summed up by David Ellis in *English Language Notes*, is that Lee is a superb biographer in part because as a writer she is an "exceptionally good one" (61). And for Carolyn Heilbrun in the *Women's Review of Books*, Lee maintains a positive balance between the demands of academic but also accessible writing: "With her talent for elegant prose Lee combines scholarly research of impressive amplitude and exactness, and the rare critical ability to dare to assert her meaning in simple sentences" (3). I will now consider some of the reasons why Lee's approach is considered favourably by academic critics, in the context of these reviews which suggest that she is identified as a scholarly biographer with the skills to tell a good story.

I would like to focus on the trend in the reviews which highlights Lee's even-handed, descriptive style, in other words her refusal to take sides or cast blame. Barbara Hardy comments that Lee's biography of Woolf is "written with intellectual and emotional openness and detachment, in an easy personal style. She speculates ... balancing probabilities and possibilities" (53). David Ellis notes the extent to which the success of Lee's biography of Woolf has been due in part to "its feminist credentials" (62), but he suggests that "Lee's feminism is of a recognisably mild variety" (62). Overall he believes that the merit of her book is that "she ... allows her reader room for manoeuvre" (66); in other words, that the biography is not overly prescriptive and leaves interpretation up to the reader. Jean Kennard in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* argues that Lee "refuses to reconcile the

contradictions in Woolf's life, just as Woolf refused to do in the lives of her characters" (134); for Patricia Hoy in the *Sewanee Review*, "Lee's biography guards against a fixed idea about Woolf's life and her writing" (670). Lee's descriptive style seems to me to lie at the heart of her biographical writing and, ultimately, the tone of her writing, which I will discuss later, sets her apart from Tomalin and Holmes.

James Klagge in *Biography*, in his review of *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (2009), highlights another reason why biographies by Lee are received favourably by academics. Paraphrasing Lee's book, he asks whether "a biography of an intellectual [must] be written by someone expert in the subject's field (12)? (849). In her introduction to the genre, Lee suggests that "there is likely to be some shared experience between the writer and the subject" (*Introduction* 12), adding that: "It would be hard, if not impossible, to write a life of a mountaineer or a gardener, a chemist or an architect, with no experience – or at least no understanding at all – of those professions" (12). Klagge praises Lee for "her descriptive rather than prescriptive stance on most issues" (849), implying that this could serve as a lesson to other biographers, but he is also arguing that as an expert literary critic, she has the credentials to write literary biography. This perspective comes through in most reviews of Lee's biographies.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Lee makes connections between the life of each subject and her life of writing, and her literary criticism in the biographies is bound up with these connections. Lee's reviewers on the whole recognise and endorse this approach: Flower acknowledges Lee's "superb literary criticism" about Wharton's novels and he comments that it "is a joy to read a biography as critically astute as this one" (508); in a review of the same biography, Yeazell is equally positive, arguing that Lee's readings of key novels by Wharton "help to persuade one that biography is a means of enhancing literature, not reducing it" (18); and Gorra finds Lee "superb in using [Wharton's novels] as a way to

read the life, defining their relation in a way that is at once seamless but never simplified” (3). He is not critical of the way in which Lee makes connections between the life and writing of Wharton. In one example, he argues that:

Nowhere does Lee claim to tell the story of what actually happened between Wharton and her mother. She presents instead the various ways Wharton recalled that experience in the long span of her writing. In effect Lee shows us how Wharton wrote her own biography – or rather how that figure can be discerned in the immense carpet of her works, when you look at the fabric carefully enough. So we are reading a biography which is about the making of a biography – both Wharton’s and Lee’s. This makes for a richer, deeper experience, not (as one might expect) a self-conscious and too-clever one. (505)

In praising her biography of Woolf, Ellis suggests that of all her qualities as a biographer, Lee is above all “a distinguished literary critic. Shrewdly aware of how fatal to the general reader’s interest extended analyses of literary works usually are in a biography, she says less than one might expect on the major works; but is always perceptive when she does consider the writing” (62). Hoy is similarly positive about the same biography and argues that “in this particular version of Virginia Woolf’s story, we can feel the ebb and flow of her life, just as we feel the rhythms of her work. Life and work overlap, reinforcing one another” (675). Yeazell sees this flow in Lee’s biographies of both Woolf and Wharton in which she “is particularly sensitive to the gap between the life as lived and the writer’s retrospective creation of herself” (18). And Edmund White makes an important distinction between Lee’s understanding that both her subjects drew on the context of their lives, but without necessarily describing detailed and specific autobiographical events or material: he argues that “Lee never reduces Wharton’s books to veiled autobiography, just as she is never

reluctant to interpret them in the light of Woolf's life ... She shows how [Woolf] returns again and again to the themes of her own life" (38). Lee is not criticised for making these connections between her biographical subjects' lives and their writing whilst other biographers, including Tomalin and Holmes, as forthcoming sections in this chapter will show, are attacked for doing so. Reviews on the whole seem untroubled that Lee's biography of Woolf relates the life of her biographical subject "to her work at every opportunity, providing interesting readings not only of the life but of the novels" (Kennard 134). Lee is not criticised for making these connections between her biographical subjects' lives and their writing whilst other biographers, including Tomalin and Holmes, as forthcoming sections in this chapter will show, are attacked for doing so.

Finally, Professor P.N. Furbank at the Open University, who has published several biographies and literary criticism as well as worked in publishing and as a freelance writer, in two reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement*, referred to earlier in this study, sum up the trends in reviews of Lee's biographies. He comments on Lee's "very fine" (9) biography of Woolf in the course of a negative review of *Granite and Rainbow: The hidden life of Virginia Woolf* (1998) by Mitchell Leaska. Furbank argues that in Leaska's biography: "What we are encountering here is a causal theory, a matter of explaining, by biographical causes, how a given work of art came to take the shape it did ... biographers (like historians) might do well to eschew causal explanations in general ... such explanations can only ever be guesswork. They might be better left to the reader" (1998 9). These are not criticisms that Furbank makes of Lee's biographies, despite the fact that she writes about connections between the life and work of her subjects. In another review Furbank expands on his belief in Lee's approach in her biography of Woolf, and here he makes a crucial link with Lee's descriptive style. He recommends that in literary biography biographers must be objective and convey the meaning they find in a life "obliquely, by the story they have made out of it" (1999 14), in particular it



is “a matter of ... arranging facts, even what some might call ‘trivial’ ones, in a significant order.... we readers do not have to have things ‘explained’ or ‘interpreted’ to us” (14). Furbank believes that Lee has “exactly the right attitude for a biographer” (14): “It is characteristic of her that, having devoted quite a number of pages to the history of sexual abuse in Woolf’s early life, and Woolf’s own varying accounts of it, Lee concludes it is impossible to arrive at the truth.... She has given us the evidence ... yet at the same time shaping it into a story – or rather, as one might say, the story of the story – and it is up to us to interpret this” (14). Furbank’s perspective highlights two possible reasons why Lee is received more favourably by most of her critics: she is descriptive rather than prescriptive, adopting a balanced, non-judgmental and scholarly tone in her biographical writing; and secondly, she has the credentials of a literary critic and an expert in her field so the connections she makes between life and writing, and vice versa, are accepted. Not only does Lee have academic credibility, but she adopts a style which is subtle and non-judgmental; in other words, as White argues, she does not make simplistic judgements seeking direct autobiographical links, but makes connections that are open to interpretation by the reader.

The following analysis of reviews of biographies by Tomalin and Holmes suggest that they are considered by academics to be more prescriptive than descriptive in tone, a criticism particularly leveled at Holmes. Also, Tomalin as a popular biographer, without formal academic credentials, leaves herself open to criticism when she writes about canonical literary subjects; and Holmes, who has not written a literary biography since joining academia, is criticised on aspects of his scholarship and his empathy with his subjects.

### **Claire Tomalin and the Biographical Fallacy**

Tomalin is understood primarily as a popular biographer and an overview of academic reviews of her biographies illustrates that the pressures on her to conform to rigorous

academic standards leave her open to criticism. She has attracted some heavyweight academic criticism from the start of her career, and although she has also always attracted positive comments from serious academics, she still, as a 'popular' writer, can feel the displeasure of experts in her field.

Some favourable points were made by academic reviewers of her first biography of Mary Wollstonecraft. Richard Cobb in the *Times Literary Supplement*, said that Tomalin "writes extremely well" (941); and for Janet Todd in *Signs*, Tomalin's approach to Wollstonecraft "is frequently witty" (732). Todd also argues, however, that the biography is "marred by errors of fact" (731), as does G.P. Tyson in *Eighteenth Century Studies*, sharing the view that this biography is "not without its minor errors" (268). Cobb is critical of her sympathy for her subject and he argues that Tomalin is too generous about the flaws of Mary Wollstonecraft's character: "the author is perhaps a little too kind to her, a little too indulgent of her very trying ways, and certainly much too generous in her assessment of her literary talents" (944). But Cobb's view is influenced by his clear lack of regard for Wollstonecraft's life and achievements; in his view "what she generally did was to cause the maximum amount of damage, both to herself and to her friends and acquaintances" (944). On the other hand, Todd suggests that the biography "provides an excellent context for several periods of Wollstonecraft's life, especially in its treatment of the French feminists of the revolutionary period and of the aristocratic Kingsboroughs, for whom Wollstonecraft worked as a governess" (732). Tyson in his review of the same biography also mentions how Tomalin's biography highlights the importance of Wollstonecraft's legacy to English women following *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792):

[Tomalin] is the first to outline the effect on Mary of the ferment for women's emancipation in France, and the first to mention Mary's legacy to English women in the form of Mary Hays's *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*

(1798). This work dares go further than *A Vindication* but only because Wollstonecraft had smoothed the way. (268)

But in another review Tomalin is criticised for attacking her subject and being unsympathetic. Professor Carol Poston, an academic who has edited editions of Wollstonecraft's books, in the *Prairie Schooner*, suggests that while "ostensibly liberal and pro-female, Tomalin's book is yet another attempt to work the facts of Wollstonecraft's life into an unfavourable interpretation of her motives" (265). Ironically, Poston would presumably argue that Tomalin agrees with Cobb, given her view that Wollstonecraft was "a scheming, manipulative, egoistic woman" (263), despite being "the first arbiter of women's rights" (263). In addition, Poston severely questions Tomalin's scholarship, arguing that the biography's "generalizations are based on sheer error" (266), such as mistakes about the career of Bishop Talleyrand, and although the biography "is meant for general, not scholarly audiences, yet even such purpose cannot excuse the mode of footnoting" (266). Poston is critical of Tomalin's lack of adequate detail about her sources, and she goes on that "Words, phrases, and descriptions used by Wollstonecraft in her novels *Mary* and *Maria* are lined up in the text by Tomalin to describe Wollstonecraft herself.... There is no excuse for lifting the material as if its reflection of the author's life were incontrovertible and, furthermore, with insufficient documentation for the reader to check the authenticity of the source" (266). Whilst they are somewhat contradictory, Tomalin is accused by one reviewer of her first biography of having a partisan approach and others raise questions about the quality of her research and other aspects of her scholarship.

Academic reviews of Tomalin's next three biographies of Katherine Mansfield, Dora Jordan and Nelly Ternan again object to her partisan voice: while there is some limited criticism of her scholarship, her enjoyable storytelling is also noted and her approach as a popular biographer is generally supported. A less critical tone by reviewers may be because

Tomalin was identified as a feminist writer in the 1980s and 1990s, writing about women, like Wollstonecraft, who challenged conventional lifestyles and had independent professional lives. Although C.K. Stead, in a review of Tomalin's biography of Mansfield in the *London Review of Books*, criticises Tomalin's feminist critique and argues that she is merely responding to what he calls the 'trigger-words' of the feminist movement when she suggests that Mansfield may have been bisexual. Claude Rawson in the *Times Literary Supplement* identifies the Mansfield biography as popular but is positive about her "sympathetic and unsentimental account, a rich narrative portrait rather than exhaustive chronicle" (27). After her biography of Mansfield Tomalin then goes on to write two further biographies of women, both of whom were subject to the whims of their powerful lovers. John Sutherland in the *London Review of Books* believes that her biography of Nelly Ternan "reads as grippingly as a detective story" in which evidence "is expertly handled" (19). Frederick Karl, in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, whose later review of her Jane Austen biography is notably critical, is aware that Tomalin makes connections between what we know and do not know about the relationship between Ternan and Dickens and he is positive about her style:

In the writing of biography, that element belonging to the inner story and that pertaining to the outer Story necessarily must connect; and here we have that arrangement, rearrangement, and inherent deception that is at stake in the very conception of biography.... Unlike many biographers, she does not attempt to deceive us about what she is doing; nor does she attempt to provide 'filler' for the gaps without warning the reader that she is speculating. For her, the gaps are as significant as the filling .... (356)

Peter Holland in his review of her biography of Dora Jordan in the *New York Review of Books*, argues that through the use of Dora's letters Tomalin "has built a moving portrait, scrupulous to the evidence, charitable – even to the Duke of Clarence" (62). Holland,

however, argues that he has found an error in her biography of Dora Jordan: when Tomalin suggests that a play, *Anna* (1793), was co-authored by Jordan Holland points out that “Tomalin makes a rare and uncharacteristic mistake when she claims that the play is lost” (64). Following these biographies, Tomalin went on to write biographies of canonical literary figures. I will mention the Pepys biography first, although this was published after Tomalin’s biography of Austen, as the following sections focus on responses to Tomalin’s literary criticism in her Austen and Hardy biographies.

Reviews of her biography of Pepys reflect comparable themes to those identified in earlier reviews. For Allen Reddick in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, scholarly research sits comfortably alongside readable storytelling:

Tomalin uses [Pepys’s diary] as a mine of information as well as an indication of style, personality, and motivation ... She has also made extensive use of other unpublished archival and manuscript sources ... Though written in part for a popular audience ... this comfortable style should not be mistaken for simplicity of interpretation. (741-742)

Lois Potter in the *Times Literary Supplement*, agrees that this “popular biography, beautifully readable, flows with apparent effortlessness ... densely spaced footnotes do the hard work of providing scholarly evidence and scholarly controversy” (9); Clara Claiborne Park in the *Hudson Review* believes that Tomalin “is impressively, because explicitly, scrupulous as she does what a biographer must, even when she has such a revealing text to work with: wonder and speculate, assess unspoken motives, honour the difference between speculation and knowledge, between what Pepys writes or is a matter of historical record, and how she thinks it happened” (244). Some criticism of her scholarship does emerge, however. Elspeth Findlay

in *The Seventeenth Century* identifies mistakes in her biography of Pepys which, she argues, reveal that Tomalin is not an expert in the relevant field of academic research:

it is claimed [in the biography] that Pepys could not have seen anyone else's diary because none were published at the time (p. 83). But while some diarists left instructions for the destruction of their diaries, there is evidence that certain kinds, including pious diaries, travel diaries and political diaries, were circulated in manuscript. Tomalin also states that 'From women [at this period] there are no known diaries' (p. 86), yet the standard reference work by Matthews, *British Diaries*, cited elsewhere by Tomalin, shows that this is not so. In a work of this scope it would be superhuman not to err, but these are more than minor factual errors. They suggest a limited interest in diaries as texts bound by generic rules. In the absence of generic analysis, Tomalin tends to assume that diaries are transparent revelations of the diarist's character. (288)

As I have discussed in an earlier chapter, Tomalin is fully aware that autobiographical writing is only one version of a life. She mentions that Pepys may have "got a glimpse" (83) of other diaries, such as the political diaries Findlay refers to, and Tomalin is aware that diaries were in vogue at the time. She notes that Pepys would have been aware that pious diaries were recommended, but the main point of her analysis is that she is keen to stress that Pepys had quite a different version of the form in mind; an intimate record and for "this he had no model" (83). Tomalin then goes on to describe other diaries by contemporaries of Pepys, citing thirty contemporary diaries in the appendix, and mentions that that

From women there are no known diaries, although Anne Fanshawe and Lady Hutchinson, both of Pepys's generation, would have been quite capable of keeping them, and each wrote spirited memoirs, from opposing political standpoints. (86)

I would suggest that Tomalin is referring to the fact that there were no known diaries published by women at the time Pepys was writing. Findlay's view does not acknowledge that Tomalin is, indeed, aware of the generic form, identifying Pepys's diary as one distinct from the rest: "Other diaries in the seventeenth century were devoted to the spiritual life, to politics or to accounts of travel and sightseeing, and even those that do give some details of domestic life are discreet about marital disagreements.... What is extraordinary is that he went into areas no-one else considered recording" (xxxv). In a discussion of Tomalin's biography of Pepys, Hermione Lee proposes that "Pepys raises some strategic problems for his biographer. If she paraphrases him, as she must, what goes missing? A few tiny examples of the transition from Diary to biography show how source material has to be tidied up, little bits of it lopped off here and there, in order to give the life-story a clear narrative shape" ('Shelley's Heart and Pepys's Lobsters' 26). Colin Burrow in the *London Review of Books* agrees that "where Tomalin triumphs is in the care and sensitivity with which she describes Pepys's vital and various relations with women" (12), although again this reviewer has concerns about questions of balance in Tomalin's approach and her prescriptive analysis. Burrow feels that she oversimplifies the tension between the different strands of Pepys's life and argues that "it is probably wrong to polarise his impulses so completely" (12). So, overall, following some hard-hitting reviews of her first biography, academics have been more positive about Tomalin's version of popular biography and are tolerant of her speculative style, although they highlight some detailed factual errors and as a result question her expertise as a scholar and researcher. They are at times also critical of her partisan voice, although their criticism is muted. It is, however, her attempts at literary criticism which have left her open to the most criticism.

A focus on Tomalin as a literary critic is noticeable in reviews of her literary biographies of Jane Austen and become particularly fierce in reviews of the Thomas Hardy

biography. Some reviews are positive. Linda Bree in *Women's Writing* argues that Tomalin offers a brief sketch of each novel in her biography of Austen, "setting it in its context and showing how it might relate to the events of Austen's life at the time" (147); she is "scrupulous in explaining where interpretation stops and speculation begins" (Bree 146). Helen Pike Bauer in *Cross Currents*, a quarterly academic journal published by the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life, welcomes the connections Tomalin makes between the life and work of her subject: she argues that Tomalin

shows how many of the threads that run through the novels, both as theme and character traits, have their origin in Austen's own life.... Tomalin traces with great care the evidence of Austen's life in her works. At first one regrets that more of this study does not discuss the novels. But one of its great strengths is Tomalin's refusal to speculate about Austen's thoughts or artistic intentions without sound support. The novels reveal a series of concerns and a quality of understanding that Tomalin traces to the life. (404)

John Wiltshire in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, is also positive about Tomalin's approach to making connections between the life and writing of Jane Austen, highlighting her empathetic style: "The technique is to bring the biographer into the picture as an imagining being, aware that to reach the past one must draw upon a range of resources, allowing these to prompt one's mind towards the possibilities of Austen's situation" (341). Wiltshire goes on to make two points which respond to aspects of academic criticism of the genre: by acknowledging her speculative approach, what he calls 'wondering', "Tomalin solves the epistemological problem that besets the biographical enterprise" (342) - in other words, she offers her perspective without claiming that it is true; and secondly, Wiltshire suggests that Tomalin offers us a reading of Austen not the reading, "not a claim to enter Jane Austen's mind, not a categorical claim to possess it" (342). Edward O'Neill, on the other hand, in *Literature and*



*History* believes that Tomalin's "sense of the importance of the body of sophisticated critical writing about [Austen] is typically weak" (75) (although typical of what he does not clarify). And in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Frederick Karl argues that there should have been "more incisive criticism of the novels, since Tomalin has decided to meld the fiction into the life (or the life into the fiction to some extent)" (212). His view is that Tomalin's approach is clearly not academic: "Like so many British biographers, Tomalin has no theoretical underpinnings to her criticism – much of it falls into appreciation" (212). Karl is also critical of two specific aspects of Tomalin's discussion of the novels and of life/work connections. He suggests that she does not fully appreciate "a systematic trope in the novel" (210) which shows how even a rational character such as Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) can be deceived by a charmer like Wickham, and as a result her "reading thins out the complications of the novel" (210). Perhaps he missed Tomalin's comment that Elizabeth "is the moral centre of the book, and her judgment of character is good in almost every case; this makes her two failures of judgment – about Darcy and about Wickham – surprising enough to provide the pivot on which the plot can turn" (163). Sometimes it is critics who need to read more closely. Secondly, in Karl's reading of Tomalin's approach, his case is that Tomalin

asserts that the world of Austen's "imagination was separate and distinct from the world she inhabited" (168). Tomalin's point appears to be that Jane did not essentially draw from life ... [that] all [the] experiences she had with friends, relatives, and neighbors did not bifurcate her imagination, but fed it.... The world she inhabited, to use Tomalin's phrase, may have been the "story", but Jane's imagination provided the "narrative", the retelling. The two inevitably blend into each other. (211)

Karl is seeking to appreciate the nuances in Tomalin's argument here. She would agree that Austen's experience informed her imagination, to the extent that it became transformed in her

writing. Tomalin is suggesting, in the quote that Karl refers to, that life and writing for Austen were closely connected but were not parallel existences in the sense of running alongside each other all the time. As I explained in Chapter Three, both a ‘life narrative’ and a ‘literary narrative’ run through Austen’s life, running at different paces, but nevertheless very much connected to each other.

Some reviews of Tomalin’s biography of Hardy are positive. James Wood in the *London Review of Books*, argues that the biography “cuts a wonderfully free, shapely narrative path through the sources” (27). Tim Parks’s review of *Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man* in the *New York Review of Books*, comments on wider criticisms of literary biography:

it has been suggested ... that we have little need of literary biography, that practically everything an author had to tell us is already present in his work. Well, reason not the need. Claire Tomalin’s biography, admirable particularly in filling in the separate settings of Dorset and London, allows the curious reader to muse for many hours on the relationship between life and fiction, between poetry and the novel. (24)

Wood makes the distinction between Tomalin’s skills as a literary critic and her ability to sum up a work and suggests that years of experience as a biographer “have taught Tomalin how to compress a summary of a novel into a couple of pages, and how to add a commonsensical yet acute judgment in a few paragraphs” (27). Rosemarie Morgan’s review of the same biography in *Victorian Poetry*, is in some respects complimentary. She considers that the biography “is intuitive and often perceptive not least in its contextual perspective and fine understanding of Hardy’s home life and historico-cultural background” (343). William Pritchard in the *Hudson Review* is positive about Tomalin’s analysis of the impact of Emma’s death on Hardy’s late poetry. He argues that “Tomalin’s claim that it was only with the poems

written in response to Emma's death that Hardy became a great poet tends now to be accepted" (322). For Jonathan Bate in the *Times Literary Supplement*, had Tomalin's biography of Thomas Hardy "been constructed as a biography of Hardy's two marriages it would have been a triumph" (4). Bate shares Pritchard's perspective suggesting that:

Tomalin's desire to move between the marriages and the works is fully justified by the fact that the novel-writing took off just at the moment when Hardy met Emma, then came to a grinding halt as the marriage finally hit the rocks in the mid-1890s. (3)

In some reviews, Bate's included, the criticism becomes very harsh. He would prefer that Tomalin had undertaken closer analysis of the novels and he comments that she "seems reluctant to take on the tricky task of mediating between invention and memory, dramatization and self-protection, in the novels. She is more comfortable with the poetry" (4). He wonders whether Tomalin's biography of Hardy lacks the "intellectual meat required for a full understanding of Hardy's achievements" (4). For other critics, the existing analysis within the biography leaves Tomalin open to criticism, including that she has fallen victim to the biographical fallacy. In *English Literature in Translation*, Keith Wilson comments that "surely even popular biography needs more to offer than a sprinkling of variably convincing psychological aperçus, a capacity to synthesize other scholars' published findings, and a less daunting page and endnote count than its more academic cousin" (441). Tomalin's lapse into what Wilson describes as an "overconfident sortie into literary criticism" (442), can lead to examples of the biographical fallacy when she makes judgements about her subjects' writing based on her knowledge of his or her life. Wilson is scathing and sees that in "page after page the blithe and casual critical judgements come tumbling out" (443). At the root of Wilson's criticism lies his allegiance to the rigors of scholarly research and in the review he cites a number of biographies of Hardy written by academics who he believes have greater understanding of Hardy's writing and life. Wilson finds that Tomalin's book "is, by contrast

[to other biographies by academics], a chattily opinionative compilation of antecedent research, enthusiastic enough about its subject but with Tomalin's own distracting personality almost as much in evidence as Thomas Hardy's" (445). Rosemarie Morgan is critical when the biography "falls into biographical fallacies" (343). When Tomalin makes specific connections between Hardy's response to his first wife Emma's death and some of his best poetry Morgan is very sceptical about:

For most scholars the "Emma" poems have little to do with Emma and more to do with a poet's remaking of the world. *The Time-Torn Man* begins with this and where there are occasionally slips into the biographical fallacy this seems to be a hazard of biographical writing.... Tomalin seeks derivation. She needs to situate the world of the poem within the real world ... [but] Poetic truth is not biographical truth: the Emma poems remain testimonies to a wished-for, longed-for world ... they are not a factual record of picnics or cliff-walks in a particular moment in history. (345)

In what she takes as another example of the biographical fallacy, Morgan comments that "Emma as Bathsheba is stretching it a bit" (346). Susan Osborn in *Literature and History* takes a similar approach to Morgan, in a review which is astonishingly negative and hostile, suggesting that Tomalin's connections between Hardy's late poetry and his wife Emma are "not only woefully inadequate, but ... so vulgarised and grotesque [is her criticism] in its flat self-assurance that it makes one wonder why Tomalin chose a subject so clearly beyond her intellectual and emotional range" (100). Osborn goes on with unresigned, vigorous ire that "to those who feel that they have become inured to slipshod writing, a special warning: Tomalin's easy generalizations, confused similes, and pedestrian descriptions will threaten to reawaken even the most resigned reader's ire" (100). Further criticism of this biography comes from Andrew Radford in *Victorian Studies*. Although he notes that "Tomalin's years of experience as a biographer have taught her the skills of summarising a novel in a few

pages, appending measured and mature judgements in a paragraph or two” (544), he is concerned that “Tomalin’s brisk summarising often misrepresents the sophisticated scepticism imbuing the fictions produced at the end of Hardy’s novel-writing career” (544). Again the criticism focuses on what is seen as superficiality in the literary analysis of the biographical subject’s writing. In recognising Tomalin as a popular biographer, academics, especially those reviewing her biography of Hardy, seem unable to accept that this form of biography is different from the more academic style found in Lee’s writing. Questions about the voice of the narrator and life/work interpretations are raised in the context of academic expectations. For academic critics, popular biography is different in quality not kind.

So, there are two key aspects of the academics critique here: firstly that a biography by Tomalin may offer literary criticism which lacks depth and breadth; and secondly that biographies by Tomalin resort to the biographical fallacy, making judgements about the novel or poem based on evidence from a writer’s life. It is significant that her harshest critics Carol Poston, Keith Wilson, Rosemarie Morgan and Susan Osborn are all academics with particular expertise in Thomas Hardy. Tomalin herself has of course extensive experience as an editor, although not of an academic journal but as a journalist, and one cannot help but wonder if there is some rather spiteful inter-professional rivalry in the response of some of her reviewers, which reflects a continuing dismissal of non-academic biography from some quarters within academia. It is not a case of proving that these academic critics are wrong or that Tomalin’s book was not very good – the point is that academic critics take the view that her book is open to criticism for specific reasons which I have discussed. I have not set out to present an alternative view of Tomalin’s approach but rather to suggest that by linking Hardy’s poems to his life she took a risk and opened herself up to the academic disdain of some critics.

This chapter has been written before many academic reviews of Tomalin's latest biography of Charles Dickens have been published, but Dinah Birch in the *Times Literary Supplement* considers that the "accumulation of fact in the biography is substantial without being oppressive ... nor are its judgements severe ... she is a tolerant observer of Dicken's flaws" (4). So for Birch the tone is more descriptive, the biographer handles her material appropriately and no accusations of the biographical fallacy are made. Tomalin remains committed to writing about her literary subjects' work: giving an overview of particular pieces of writing and making connections between the life and work of her subject. In her introduction to the Dickens biography, Tomalin discusses how, in her view, Dickens transforms his experience in his writing:

He saw the world more vividly than other people, and reacted to what he saw with laughter, horror, indignation – and sometimes sobs. He stored up his experiences and reactions as raw material to transform and use in his novels, and was so charged with imaginative energy that he rendered nineteenth century England crackling, full of truth and life. (xlvi)

This is an approach which Stephen Wall in the *Times Literary Supplement* noted in a review from 1990 of Tomalin's biography of Nelly Ternan and her relationship with Dickens: Wall suggests that Dickens's "instinct is less to look things in the face than to change them into something else" (1177). The extent to which academic reviewers will now find her a more descriptive, less partisan narrator, remains to be seen but as the reviews discussed in this chapter suggest, she is already, like Lee, accepted as a skilled writer of moving and convincing portraits.

## **Richard Holmes and Personal Biography**

Of the three biographers studied for this thesis Holmes has received the most passionate reviews, in tune with his own passion for Romanticism. Some reviews are unconditionally positive and an anonymous review of the first volume of his Coleridge biography, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, is a good example of this:

This well-written and engrossing biography should go quite a way toward re-establishing [Coleridge] as one of the major figures of English literature. Holmes' exhaustive research sheds new light on Coleridge's relationship with Wordsworth and his intellectual development. Readers will eagerly watch for the next volume. (21)

Seamus Perry in his review of the second volume in *Wordsworth Circle*, notes that it cannot be described as a scholarly work but nevertheless he argues that Holmes gets "the balance unerringly right, bracing the solidly documentary against the freshly novelistic in a truly Coleridgean meeting of opposites" (177). He also thinks that Coleridge's notebooks "are beautifully selected, [by Holmes] amused and rapt by turn" (178). These reviews cover themes already identified in my analysis of reviews of biographies by Tomalin and Lee, in particular the balance between Holmes's writing style and storytelling ability and the quality of his research. But reviews of his biographies are rarely entirely positive and I would argue that the dominant themes in these often negative reviews relate to, and in fact mirror, the two factors which distinguish positive reviews of Hermione Lee's biographies, namely that Holmes is considered a partisan narrator and a poor literary critic.

Peter Conrad in the *Times Literary Supplement* is initially critical of Holmes's harshness towards his first biographical subject, Percy Shelley: "Mr Holmes compiles an inventory of the wreckage Shelley scattered in his wake" (846). But he goes on in his review

to identify Holmes's sympathy for his subject, his Romanticism, and Holmes's perspective that his subject's life is inexorably linked with his writing:

his Stracheyan diminution of his subject is uneasily combined with a thematic account ... of a pursued, harassed Shelley – and this reverts from the wrinkled lip of Strachey to a subjective sympathy which is unmistakably Romantic. It extends psychologically the Romantic notion of a life as an allegory on which the poet's works are a comment". (846)

Conrad is also critical of Holmes's literary criticism "as some poems ... are passed quietly by" (846) and he argues that this biography "is not genuinely critical: it does not convincingly attach the poetry to the character" (847). Another contemporary review of this biography has similar concerns. Dewey Faulkner in the *Yale Review*, comments on Holmes's 'immersion' in his subject's life (a concern which runs across the many years of Holmes's career), but he worries in particular about Holmes's literary criticism and research: "one does expect a higher standard of literary sensitivity than one finds in this biography" (135) and in his view a "serious objection to the book is the question of its use of secondary sources" (136). John Freeman in *Essays in Criticism* argues that Holmes's biography is "at its best in evoking the historical and personal context of Shelley's life. He shows how Shelley's political writing was related to the events and ideas of the time" (457). But Holmes "has a tendency ... to spoil a good case by exaggeration" (458), as when he makes the case for the importance of Claire Clairmont in Shelley's life. Freeman accuses Holmes of making wild guesses about this relationship. But Freeman is particularly harsh when he reviews Holmes's literary criticism and his judgmental approach towards Shelley's character:

It is typical that the evidence of the poetry ... is misread in a way which is, at best, extremely careless.... His talents are not those of a critic. He bluffs it out with a



positive and trenchant air, but his downright judgements are rarely supported by argument or demonstration, and the more unprecedented they are, the less he finds to say for them.... Holmes simply cannot be trusted; even about the life, and still less about the work. More serious than the misreporting of facts is the way Shelley's subtle mind and character—and to call him subtle is not to deny his shortcomings—are refracted by Holmes into something infinitely cruder. His ideas about love and sex are an obvious and important casualty, as are his own relationships. (461)

In this review Freeman compares Holmes's biography with another written by an academic, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (1974) by K. N. Cameron. According to Freeman, "Cameron has the advantage and disadvantage of a lifelong devotion to Shelley scholarship" (462) and he "at least ... is not tempted to distort his account in order to fit a favourite theory. Where the evidence is inconclusive ... Cameron states the evidence as clearly and succinctly as possible ... without becoming the partisan of one plausibility over others. The reader ... can see the possibilities for himself" (462). And in his literary criticism "Cameron is thorough, reliable, and clear. His readings of the poems are always careful and sensible" (463), not a view shared by reviewers of Holmes's analysis. Cameron offers a descriptive analysis and, like Lee, is recognised as an expert in his field, whilst Holmes is not. And this lies at the heart of the criticism of Holmes's biographies, when they are criticised for a lack of scholarship; these reviewers will downgrade biographers who do not match up to their own academic expectations.

Some reviewers are positive about Holmes's two volume biography of Coleridge. Mark Jarman in the *Hudson Review* argues that "Holmes manages to attribute the most serious controversy, the charge of plagiarism, to Coleridge's opium-taking... [reflecting] our own contemporary attitudes toward psychological turmoil" (503). Jarman is more tolerant than some reviewers of Holmes's analysis of Coleridge's plagiarism; although "Coleridge

stole many of his great ideas [this] does not lessen the fact that they remain influential because of the way Coleridge expressed them” (503). Jarman is not overly critical of Holmes’s version of his subject in the second volume and he seems to share an empathy with this biographical subject: “We can see at the end of this biography how well and truly, and painfully, Coleridge became his Ancient Mariner, in the grip of mysterious compulsions and given the strange power to bind others in the spell of his speech” (506). Ashton Nichols in the *Southern Humanities Review* agrees that the importance of Coleridge’s interpretation of the work of Schilling and Schlegel should not be underestimated: “Holmes pries out the nuanced detail of these borrowings and always reveals the extent to which Coleridge altered, expanded upon, or otherwise enhanced the obvious sources of some of his ideas” (380). Stephen Gill in the *Times Literary Supplement* is also initially positive about this biography and argues, in his review of the first volume of the Coleridge biography, that “Holmes’s biography is a good read. The narrative manages not to bewilder, while it brings out how bewildering Coleridge was” (1203) and he suggests that the biography is most successful when Holmes writes about the personal life of Coleridge, a key point I will return to later in this section.

But Gill raises similar issues to Conrad and Freeman and is concerned that Holmes’s popular biography about Coleridge cannot successfully deal with his writing: “The problem is that the materials available to the biographer differ so greatly in their interest, especially in the interest they can hold for the non-academic reader” (1203). Gill argues that from a reading of Holmes’s biography it would be difficult for a reader who does not know Coleridge’s prose writing well to grasp his extensive contribution as a writer. And Gill is concerned when, in his view, Holmes misjudges key aspects of Coleridge’s writing life: “Holmes ... uses evidence too lightly, perhaps through anxiety not to burden the general reader with too much “academic” material, and here it seems to me that the shortcomings of the book are serious” (1204). Gill is critical of Holmes’s depth of knowledge and perspective

in his analysis of Coleridge's poetry and he believes that Holmes misunderstands the extent to which poetry lay at the heart of the conflict between himself and Wordsworth. In his review Jonathan Wordsworth, in the *New York Times Book Review*, agrees that the biography does not adequately address what he calls "the literary relationship within which [Coleridge's] greatest work was written" (11).

In another review Rosemary Ashton in the *Times Literary Supplement*, argues that Holmes's first volume of his Coleridge biography works well as a pursuit of the young Coleridge's footsteps and Holmes's "sharp ear for poetic detail delivered some fine analysis of the poetry in the first volume" (27). Ashton is also positive about Holmes's attitude to Coleridge's plagiarism of the work of German contemporaries Schlegel and Schelling: "Holmes's reasonable conclusion is that Coleridge had no intellectual need to steal, but did so out of the moral and emotional confusion created by his addiction" (27). But as Coleridge fades in the later years of his life, crippled by drug addiction and depression, Ashton is less tolerant and considers that Holmes "sometimes lets Coleridge off the hook for the sake of his genius and also because he sets store by understanding the damage Coleridge's addiction did to his moral balance" (27). These reviewers challenge Holmes's analysis and expertise in his biographies of Coleridge.

John Barrell in the *London Review of Books*, Norman Fruman in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and John Worthen in the *Cambridge Quarterly*, are particularly critical of the way that Holmes uses evidence in his Coleridge biographies: Fruman calls this "Holmes's ingenious manipulation of the documentary record" (14). Fruman argues that Holmes's second Coleridge biography "is a shockingly partisan, credulous and misleading biography" (14) and he is disparaging of any approach which suggests that "forces outside Coleridge's own character [can be] held responsible for his misfortunes and derelictions, chief among them the Demon opium" (14). These critics suggest that Holmes misinterprets, misuses or

even misquotes evidence from Coleridge's writing, including his notebooks, so that his narrative can fit the story he wants to tell and their criticism highlights academic commitment to the rigours of scholarly and literary research. What is noticeable about the Barrell and Fruman reviews is that they are both positive about Holmes's biography of Shelley. For Fruman the second volume of the Coleridge biography is "almost impossible to accept as the work of the same Richard Holmes who, in *Shelley, the Pursuit* (1974), was unremittingly suspicious, and censorious towards his subject, whom he found a selfish, supercilious, hysterical, philandering wretch, "characteristically" given to "calculating duplicity", as well as "paroxysm[s] of revengeful anger" (14); Fruman's focus is on Holmes's critical view of Shelley, which this reviewer welcomes in preference to the partisan nature of Holmes's very positive approach towards his second biographical subject. Barrell argues that Holmes's biography of Shelley does not conform to the expectations of popular literary biography at the end of the twentieth century, but that the second volume of his Coleridge biography does. These expectations, according to Barrell, are that "Coleridge's poetry may be quoted where it appears to throw light on his private life. His prose writings may be discussed only as long as that discussion does not interrupt or retard the narrative: so long, that is, as the writing of a work can itself be presented as a story" (18). As I will go on to argue later in this chapter, this may well indeed be Holmes's aim and reflects the difference between academic biography versus popular biography. Other criticisms of Holmes's biographies refer to his alleged identification with and empathy for his subjects. In the first and second volume of his Coleridge biography Ashton accepts that Holmes "prefers to look with Coleridge, using as far as possible the poet's own words ... rather than look at him" (27), a view shared by James Finn Cotter in his review of the first volume published in *The Hudson Review*. Cotter implies a lack of critical objectivity, suggesting that when attributing work to either Wordsworth or Coleridge during their period of collaboration, "Holmes gives Coleridge the benefit of the

doubt” (146). In his review of both Coleridge biographies, Barrell is especially critical, and suggests that like a ventriloquist’s dummy Holmes’s voice usurps that of his subject’s narrative; Holmes uses Coleridge “to pass off his own thoughts as the thoughts of Coleridge. Holmes’s eagerness to identify with Coleridge throughout the two volumes of his biography sometimes seems to persuade him that he can speak Coleridge’s mind for him, and, when he does, the effect is uncanny: two minds with but a single thought” (20). Reviews of Holmes’s later biography of romantic scientists also focus on Holmes’s empathy. John Carey’s review in *The Sunday Times*, is positive and highlights two of the main aspects of Holmes’s style: firstly, his aim to focus on his subject’s genius, rather than their work, and to ‘bring them to life’; and secondly, his aim to write an enthralling and engaging story. Carey suggests that:

Holmes shows how richly science and Romanticism overlapped.... [he] suffuses his book with the joy, hope and wonder of the revolutionary era. Reading it is like a holiday in a sunny landscape, full of fascinating bypaths that lead to unexpected vistas. He believes that we must engage the minds of young people with science by writing about it in a new way, entering imaginatively into the biographies of individual scientists and showing what makes them just as creative as poets, painters and musicians. *The Age of Wonder* is offered, with due modesty, as a model, and it succeeds inspiringly. (44)

However, in her review of this biography published in the *London Review of Books*, Susan Eilenberg is much less positive and comments on two familiar themes in reviews of Holmes’s work, namely his identification with one of his subjects and some reservations about the accuracy of his scholarship when evidence is used, possibly misused, to serve the story he wants to tell; in her view “*The Age of Wonder* is not a book one ought to rely on for perfect factual accuracy” (25) and “What *The Age of Wonder* narrates is also, Holmes reminds us,

what Banks himself would have been learning. An ‘all-seeing eye’ ... peers out of successive chapters ... it is impossible not to think too that Holmes recognises in this eye a mocking reflection of his own” (25). Holmes’s main focus on the personal story of his subjects’ lives is again something noted by this reviewer: “Holmes is as interested in who his subjects were, and what it felt like to be who they were and do what they did, as he is in what they did. He is interested even when the feeling had apparently nothing to do with the doing” (24).

Two biographers who are not academics offer a useful overview of criticisms of Holmes’s biographical writing and suggest ways to understand Holmes’s empathy with his subjects. Graham Robb, biographer of Victor Hugo and Rimbaud, in a review of *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer* (2000), makes a connection between the view of academics about Holmes’s writing and Holmes’s own approach, which helps to explain the tension between academic critics and Holmes’s narrative style: “Academic critics have been known to find [Holmes’s] flighty, subjective approach exasperating or theoretically unsound. Happily, in *Sidetracks*, Richard Holmes enters the interminable debate only briefly ... The practical conclusion gently suggested [by Holmes] is that the vital ingredient of a successful biography is not sound theory but good writing” (28). And Michael Holroyd’s review of Holmes’s *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985) makes a comparable connection between Holmes’s academic credentials and his empathetic approach to his subjects:

During his researches Richard Holmes kept a diary recording his own experiences on one side of the page, and Shelley’s on the other. Before long Shelley’s narrative greatly exceeded his own. *Footsteps* is the product of this intertextuality and the imaginary conversations scored over those contrapuntal pages. Though he wears his learning with the lightness of a helium balloon, Mr Holmes is a considerable scholar

whose command of facts and chronology saved him from the wrong sort of involvement with his subject. He achieved intimacy, but not *subjective* intimacy: the objective thread in the biographical pattern is preserved. (20)

These comments highlight that, like his peers Lee and Tomalin, Holmes's narrative is appreciated for the quality of his writing, his storytelling abilities. They also highlight that form and content are closely connected, as discussed in the earlier chapter on his work. In addition, Holmes combines empathy and prescriptive views with extensive research. In doing so, despite Perry's more positive review, Holmes has left himself open to critics who challenge his partisan and prescriptive, rather than descriptive, narration – qualities more often found in popular biography. Finally, Gill, Barrell and Fruman are academics who have a research interest in Romantic literature and as a non-academic, at the time he wrote his biographies, Holmes has strayed into their specialist territory and they criticize him for what they see as his lack of objectivity and factual accuracy. My point here is again not to comment on this particular view but rather to draw attention to this theme within academic criticism.

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Perhaps critical biography, which encompasses literary criticism, may only be appropriate for the academic market, whilst what could be called popular, or personal biography, another form of the genre, may be aimed at general readers. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Wimsatt and Beardsley identified this important distinction arguing that literary biography is “one approach ... to personality, the poem being only a parallel approach. Certainly it need not be a derogatory purpose [to consider] personal studies, as distinct from poetic studies, in the realm of literary scholarship” (10). And they sum up the problem which academics, critical of biography, find in popular literary biography: “there is danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal

as if it were poetic” (10). Holmes’s allegiance is to personal biography and his discussion of his subjects’ writing is constructed for this purpose, but academics have perhaps not been willing to acknowledge this form of the genre. As Barrell argues in his discussion of the second volume of the Coleridge biography, for Holmes: “Coleridge’s writing has significance chiefly as an exhalation from his most private anxieties, and is to be read mainly as a key to understanding them” (19). For Barrell this is negative criticism, whilst for popular or personal biography this may be the very effect that is desired; as Holmes suggests in *Sidetracks*, “the possibility and the desirability of knowing our fellow man and woman – how we really are, the worst and the best – has remained extraordinarily constant. And biography has gradually become a prime instrument, a major artistic form, of that essentially humane, courageous and curiously cheering epistemology” (371). Indeed, two reviewers of Holmes’s Coleridge biography have made comparable points: Ashton Nichols argues that “perhaps Holmes’s greatest strength is his presentation of Coleridge’s complex human relations” (379); and Lee defends Holmes in response to Barrell’s attack, by arguing that Holmes’s writing is openly experimental and that his “journeys into his subjects’ lives are interior as well as historical and geographic. Always deploying their letters, notebooks, manuscript writings, and published work as part of the texture of his narrative, he works his way into their thoughts, and speaks with empathy and confidence about their states of mind” (53). And she goes on: “At the center of any analysis of biography – as it is at the center of all Richard Holmes’s work – is the question of personality” (55), a comment which echoes Wimsatt and Beardsley. Graham Holderness offers a comment on the form which supports her view, evoking Holmes’s image of biography as a pursuit and bringing the idea of personal biography up to date; “biography must tamper with this realm of the personal, with the hidden life of the subject, and with the efforts of those who try to own and define that life.... Biography pursues the elusive personality of the subject, and the biographer needs to have the skills of a



novelist, rather than those of a diplomat. Biography should be emotionally involved ... experimental and innovative ... In addition biography should be metaphysical, explicitly telling the story of the biographer's engagement with the subject" (133). In the process, as I discussed in the chapter on the work of Lee, both biographical subject and biographer become ghostly presences within the narrative. But biography, including personal or popular biography, is more than a study of personality; it also helps us to learn both about connections between the past and the present, and the extent to which what happens in our lives, and how we connect with other people, informs what we do, writing in the case of authors and poets.

## Chapter 7

### The Situation Today: “Life-writing” and the Academic Status of Biography

This chapter will consider the extent to which biography, since the advent of Theory and its criticism of the genre, has been recognised as an academic subject within British universities. It will focus focus on academic journals which publish articles about the genre; the development of courses which offer biography as a subject, as well as courses for practising and aspiring biographers; the growth of “life-writing”, a newly designated field which includes biography, and of life-writing centres; and the emergence of scholarly networks devoted to biography and/or life-writing and supported by universities and academic funding bodies. The chapter discusses developments in British universities but will also mention a few comparable developments within universities in other countries, to place those within Britain in a wider context.

Two main findings emerge from an overview of courses, journals, and life-writing centres. Firstly, that within the last twenty years there has been a formal growth of academic interest in what has come to be called life-writing within British universities, one which encompasses, among others, biography, autobiography, journals, diaries, letters and memoirs. This growth is now based on an interdisciplinary approach which includes film, drama and performance, new media, dance, and the study of the body, memory, place and objects. One response by the academy to objections to traditional written biography has been to seek out alternative forms of life-writing and respond to the voices of non-canonical subjects. In doing so a new, more flexible discipline has emerged. As Hermione Lee has noted, “the word ‘biography’ literally means ‘life-writing’” (*A Very Short Introduction* 5) but biography, based on written narrative, has been subsumed within a wider definition of form and subject matter within life-writing. In the process written biography is reaching out to other disciplines,

including science and medicine, exploring the connections between different disciplines, in particular social sciences and the humanities. Secondly, while undergraduate courses encompassing life-writing are either targeted at students who want to write memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, and other forms of life-writing, and are located in centres for creative writing, or are based in social science courses where students study the connections between life-writing and social and cultural history, graduate research centres provide a forum for those who embrace the wider, interdisciplinary study of life-writing across the social science and humanities, although they also include practising biographers of written narratives.

Max Saunders, Co-Director of the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College, London, partly accounts for the growth of life-writing as a discipline by stressing its tendency not only to bring together different forms, seeing them as part of a larger generic category, but to blur the distinctions between these forms. It is now a commonplace among students of life-writing that biography and autobiography "cannot be kept entirely separate from each other, and that the term 'auto/biography' can condense their interrelations" (*Self Impression* 6) Some researchers, like Saunders, take this analysis further, suggesting that "auto/biography itself cannot be kept entirely apart from fiction; that however truthful or candid an autobiography might be judged, it is nonetheless a narrative, and shares its narrative features with fictional narratives" (7). Such a view, as it applies to biography, is carefully pondered in this thesis. I have sought to argue that biography, as a form of life-writing, certainly shares narrative features with fiction, but that it is – or means to be, or presents itself as – rooted in evidence not invention; biography is a form of creative nonfiction. It is a question of balance of course as the lines between autobiography and biography are blurred and questions about the validity of some evidence are open to question.

In recent years several British academics, who are also biographers, have written about the state of biography within universities. In 2008 Richard Holmes was positive about the place of the genre in academic study:

The study of biography has revived Literature as one of the traditional ‘humanities’, rescuing it from the deserts of Literary Theory and reviving the ideals of Creative Writing courses.

In Britain, this new pedagogical phenomenon began at the private University of Buckingham in 199[6], in a course run by Jane Ridley. It was followed in 2000 by the University of East Anglia (already famous for its Creative Writing course), which set up an MA in Life-writing under Lorna Sage, largely inspired by the novelist and critic Malcolm Bradbury. (“The Past Has a Great Future” 27)

As Holmes goes on to point out, “the University of East Anglia (UEA) appointed its first professor of biography: a working writer, not an academic. This happened to be me. This was my first (and only) academic post in forty years as a working biographer” (28). Professor Hermione Lee from the University of Oxford, in her introduction to the genre published in 2009, notes that

It is only recently that biography has become a regular subject for books and essays, and an established academic discipline. For example, the University of Hawaii has had a Center for Biographical Research since 1978; courses and departments of Life-Writing have been set up in several British universities; there is a Biography Institute at the Australian National University in Canberra, a Center for biography at City University in New York, and an Institute in Vienna dedicated to the ‘systematic’ study of the History and Theory of Biography. (94)

This chapter will discuss the part that British universities are playing in the practice and study of the genre.

A review article, also published in 2009, by Professor Kathryn Hughes from the University of East Anglia, on *Teaching Life-Writing Texts* (2007), edited by Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes, considers the state of life-writing courses:

life-writing has now become a fixture on university teaching timetables around the world as a discrete genre, quite separate from literary or historical studies. Many postsecondary institutions currently run modules in life-writing at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels... What is more, in the past twenty years or so, the kinds of texts routinely included in such modules have become diversified, changed beyond all recognition.... now a reading list might include diaries, oral histories, and group biographies. Film, photography, and social networking sites could also be added to the list.... The discussions that these texts inevitably generate are something new too. Where once students of life-writing might have concentrated on issues of empathy, hagiography, truth-telling, and female experience, they are now likely to consider anything from sexual trauma to ethnic identity, genocide or disability. (159)

A 2010 special edition of the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, to be discussed later in the chapter, considers the ‘Work of Life-writing’, based on papers presented at a conference held at Kings College, London in 2009. In one paper Hughes is positive about the place of biography within universities:

We are working at a time when biography as both a mode of writing and an object of study appears to have been accepted by British universities. After decades of lingering suspicion about the genre’s apparent lack of a coherent methodology, poetics, or theoretical framework, several higher education institutions including Warwick,

Sussex, and Oxford now offer their students the chance to read and even produce life-writing of various kinds. Meanwhile, at Buckingham, King's College London, Sussex, and the University of East Anglia there are stand-alone MA programs that aim to provide a practical and theoretical apprenticeship to emerging biographers. International academic conferences of the sort that brought so many university-based scholars to King's College London in May 2009 are flourishing as are those pioneering periodicals, *a/b* and *Biography*. (281)

What is noticeable in 2012 is that the M.A. at Buckingham is the only masters course which focuses exclusively on biography, another example of the integration of biography within wider life-writing. Brief information about what is on offer at these universities in 2012-2013 is provided in this chapter.

Professor Ray Monk, University of Southampton, at a symposium organised by the recently established 'Challenges to Biography Network', also discussed later in this chapter, held at Nottingham University in December 2011, gave a lecture with the title, "Is there still a place for biography within the academy?" In his lecture he provides a useful summary of the state of life-writing within British universities in 2012, citing five main journals which concern themselves with life-writing: *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, *Biography*, the *Journal of Historical Biography*, *Life-Writing* and the *Journal of Medical Biography*. He notes that a number of specialist life-writing institutes have developed at British universities, commenting on those at Sussex University, Oxford University, Edinburgh University and Kings College, London; Monk points out that at both Sussex and Edinburgh the perspective is sociological. He also identifies a number of academic courses in Britain devoted specifically to biography, citing Buckingham University, the University of East Anglia as well as Goldsmith College. I will provide information about the courses, centres and journals mentioned by Monk in this chapter.

## Courses

A significant number of British universities now offer undergraduate and postgraduate modules and courses in biography and life-writing, often based within creative writing departments. This section offers a very brief snapshot of courses offered by universities, giving a few examples to illustrate the exciting range of approaches taken across different institutions, in particular some of the best-known courses in life-writing at: Buckingham, East Anglia, Oxford, Sussex, Kingston and King's College, London.

A sample of university websites illustrates some of the undergraduate courses available to aspiring biographers seeking opportunities to develop their skills as writers. An undergraduate module at Warwick University called 'The Practice of Life-Writing' aims to explore the complexities of different forms of life-stories "both as literary-historical phenomena and as practical issues that writers have to deal with" ([www.warwick.ac.uk](http://www.warwick.ac.uk)). Students can then go on to study for an M.A. in Writing, which is aimed at writers, including biographers and autobiographers, who may want to go into the profession, "whether in full-time authorship or in related professions such as publishing, the media, or teaching" ([www.warwick.ac.uk](http://www.warwick.ac.uk)). This is an example of a course which offers students an opportunity to develop their skills as writers of nonfiction whilst also encouraging them to look at a range of career options. The University of East Anglia has a strong reputation for creative writing courses and life-writing is featured in relevant courses at undergraduate level. As part of its B.A. in English Literature "there is the opportunity [for students] to extend your awareness of literature through your own writing" ([www.uea.ac.uk](http://www.uea.ac.uk)). A specialist course on biography is available as an undergraduate option and students can also take a joint honours course with creative writing. An undergraduate module in the Kingston University creative writing course, "Get a Life: Forms of (Auto)biography", covers the "study of different types of,

(auto)biographical texts, including personal memoir, narratives of family secrets, illness, trauma and abuse narratives, celebrity memoirs, childhood memoir, food memoir, personal diaries, individual and group biographies” ([www.kingston.ac.uk](http://www.kingston.ac.uk)).

Some universities provide specialist short courses on creative writing and life-writing. Oxford University offers short courses on “Writing Lives” and “Life-writing” within the Department for Continuing Education. City of London University runs a short course, including biography, called “Narrative Non-Fiction”, aimed at students who are thinking of embarking on a substantial piece of writing. Similarly, Exeter University in 2012 offers an online short course, “Life-writing: Autobiography or Biography” which is “for anyone who’d like to write about people and their lives, including, of course, your own. It looks in depth at the different elements of getting started with life-writing, including characterisation, narrative structure and editing to printing, publishing and marketing” ([www.exeter.ac.uk](http://www.exeter.ac.uk)). University College Falmouth is offering a summer school on life-writing in 2012 focusing on memoir and autobiography and Kingston University is offering a short course on life-writing skills, also in 2012.

A search for information about postgraduate courses on the UCAS website identifies eleven courses under the categories of English Literature, creative writing and life-writing: the postgraduate course at King’s College is identified under the category “Life-writing”; the Buckingham University M.A. is the only course labelled “Biography”; courses at Goldsmiths, University of London, Edinburgh Napier University, London Metropolitan University, and the University of Glasgow can be found under the heading Creative Writing; while those at the universities of Kingston, Exeter, Lincoln and the Open University are grouped under the category of English or English Literature. Other universities also offer postgraduate courses in this field. A course at the University of Chester, “Nineteenth Century Literature and



Culture”, considers the relationship between texts, including life texts, and the period from which they emerged. At Royal Holloway students are offered a number of options within an M.A. in Creative Writing, one of which is a Life-Writing M.A. which “encourages the study of biography as an academic and creative discipline, and aims to supply students with the research skills and tools of critical and creative appreciation requisite to developing careers as life writers” ([www.rh.ac.uk](http://www.rh.ac.uk)). City University in 2012 offers a “Creative Writing (Non-Fiction)” M.A. which includes biography, suggesting that at the end of the course students will “leave with a complete full-length book, rather than a dissertation or other ‘academic’ piece of work” ([www.city.ac.uk](http://www.city.ac.uk)). At Oxford University, within the Faculty of English, students can study life-writing at postgraduate level as part of the masters programme in English Language and Literature and English and American Studies.

Only a single course is more narrowly and traditionally focused solely on biography. An “M.A. in Biography” at Buckingham University was the first of its kind when it was offered in 1996 and “unlike most Life-Writing degrees, it is not linked to creative writing but has an emphasis on ‘research and historical biography’” ([www.buckingham.ac.uk](http://www.buckingham.ac.uk)). Students can opt for a taught or research-based master’s course at Buckingham and if they choose the latter option they are required to write a short biography. The research methods training for the course is especially devised for biographers. This focus on traditional historical biography at Buckingham is a unique specialism not offered elsewhere.

The University of East Anglia in 2012-2013 will run an “M.A. in ‘Biography and Creative Non-Fiction’”, acknowledging the evolving nature of the form:

Biography is currently undergoing rapid change and reformation. Instead of the old ‘cradle to grave’ narratives of well-known literary or political figures, our best writers are now experimenting with new forms and subjects. Nature-writing, the personal

essay, food journalism, art criticism and memoir are all part of the exciting emerging mix. This MA programme is for anyone who wants to develop their own writing in any of these genres while studying at the country's leading university for the teaching of Creative Writing. ([www.uea.ac.uk](http://www.uea.ac.uk))

King's College London offers an "M.A. in Life-Writing". According to its website the course aims to offer students the chance to explore a range of topics and texts from the eighteenth century to the present, inviting students to think broadly across conventional period boundaries. The programme aims to provide teaching and research training at postgraduate level in a wide range of aspects of life-writing, based in a research environment which values scholarly inquiry and independence of thought ... Students receive training in research and writing skills (including manuscript work, bibliographies, internet resources) in preparation for the completion of a large-scale research project. ([www.kings.ac.uk](http://www.kings.ac.uk))

An "M.A. in English Literature" at Kingston includes a module on "Life-Writing" which considers debates about the nature of life-writing including "the ways in which the 'self' is constructed through narrative; the significance of 'ordinary' lives; the ethics of biographical disclosure; and the precariousness of 'authentic' representation" ([www.kingston.ac.uk](http://www.kingston.ac.uk)). One module on this masters course, "Writing Lives, Writing Places", studies connections between the narration of individual lives and the representation of places. Finally, within the social sciences, The "M.A. in Life History Research" at Sussex University has a focus on social history which draws on the Mass Observation Archive about the lives of ordinary people based at Sussex. It has an interdisciplinary approach which includes history, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Other courses are also evolving within the social sciences. For example, Brighton University offers an M.A. in "Cultural History, Memory and Identity"

which looks at a range of influences which inform our everyday lives. It includes the study of oral life stories, auto/biography and cultural memories as expressed in film, photography, television, imaginative literature and history.

Comparing the information about some of these masters courses, Buckingham clearly focuses on historical biography of particular individuals, Sussex on social history and the social sciences, UEA is aimed at the aspiring biographer and the practice of biography, Kings has an emphasis on research and scholarship as well as writing skills, and Kingston explores connections between literature and constructions of the self. However, these differences are superficial and may be misleading. Many of the courses are new and evolving and these self-descriptions – the basis of this short survey – are likely to alter.

A limited number of books have been published to support the growth of life-writing courses. *Teaching Life-Writing Texts* (2007) edited by Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes gives examples of courses run in the United States, Australia, Canada and Europe. Four courses located in Britain are mentioned in the book: the course at Exeter University which offers undergraduates an opportunity to study the generic boundaries between biography, autobiography and auto/biographical fiction; the masters level module at Kingston University, “Writing the Self” which covers autobiography, memoir diaries, family history and fictional autobiography and looks at the blurring between autobiography and fiction; a module for a masters course at Sussex University focuses on connections between autobiography and photography in a feminist context; and finally, a masters courses on the “Cultures of Life-Writing” at the University of York which also takes a feminist perspective on autobiography. A second book, a study guide for students, *Writing Lives: Literary Biography* (2009) by Midge Gillies highlights the blurring of boundaries between different disciplines in life-writing. Gillies notes that writing “about a life can take many forms” (111)

and she includes biographical fiction as one form alongside letters, memoirs, diaries and biographies. She suggests that the biographer and reader “can learn much about an author and their work from a whole range of writing that includes autobiography, memoir, journals, letters and autobiographical fiction, poetry and nonfiction. This often tangled web of versions of the same story is frequently referred to as life-writing” (10). The guide invites the student reader to work on sixteen extracts from key life-writing texts only four of which are from individual or group biographies, the rest being taken from fiction, autobiography, metabiography, poetry, a diary and an interview. In this guide, literary biography is defined as any form of text about a writer’s life. Gillies also cuts across debates about connections between the life of a writer and his or her writing by boldly suggesting that a student can study the life of a writer by analyzing his or her fiction.

### **Life-Writing Centres**

The first two centres of life-writing to be established in Britain have a sociological perspective. The “Centre for Life History and Life-writing Research” run by Dr Margareta Jolly, Reader in Education at the University of Sussex, established in 1999, over five years before further comparable developments elsewhere, has a sociological focus. The Centre’s aims are twofold:

- to highlight University of Sussex experience and expertise in the field of life history and life-writing research, both within the University and beyond;
- to link the theory and methods of oral history with the analysis and practice of life-writing. ([www.sussex.ac.uk](http://www.sussex.ac.uk))

The sociological orientation of the Centre is clear from its website: “Life stories capture the relation between the individual and society, the local and the national, the past

and present and the public and private experience” ([www.sussex.ac.uk](http://www.sussex.ac.uk)). The interdisciplinary character of the field is again stressed, “including history, sociology, anthropology, literary philosophy, cultural studies and psychology.... Life history and life-writing research is, of necessity, concerned with ethics and power relationships, and with the potential for advocacy and empowerment” ([www.sussex.ac.uk](http://www.sussex.ac.uk)).

The “Centre for Narrative & Auto/Biographical Studies (NABS)” is an interdisciplinary “virtual” research centre established in 2006 and directed by Liz Stanley, Professor of Sociology at Edinburgh University. The centre has a broad remit and aims to bring together “people interested in all aspects of narrative and all forms of auto/biographical representation, from talk to transcribed text, from photographs to memorial sites, from verbal introductions to hagiography, from letters and cards to friends to memoirs and autobiographies, from obituaries to painted portraits, from academic biography to sculpture, and more” ([www.edinburgh.ac.uk](http://www.edinburgh.ac.uk)).

Other centres with a focus on cultural and social history are also emerging. For example the University of Brighton has a “Centre for Research in Memory, Narrative and Histories” which has an interest in life-writing research. The Centre explores oral and written first person narratives, exploring connections between individual and collective narratives and “the relationship between life histories, and their fictionalised popular representation as ‘faction’”. (<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/research/centre-for-research-in-memory-narrative-and-histories>)

Two centres originally rooted in the humanities rather than the social sciences were established in 2007, the year research for this study began. The “Centre for Life-Writing Research”, at King’s College, London, led by Professor Max Saunders and Dr Clare Bryant, is an interdisciplinary research centre. It brings together academics “researching different

forms of life-writing, including biography, autobiography, letters, memoirs, the visual arts especially portraiture, poetry, medical narratives including case histories” ([www.kings.ac.uk](http://www.kings.ac.uk)).

In a comment on the website for the centre, which reflects the hybrid nature of life-writing, the site mentions that:

In recent years, life-writing has become an exciting point of contact between universities and a more general audience. The Centre is committed to encouraging and expanding such contacts. ([www.kings.ac.uk](http://www.kings.ac.uk))

In addition to running an academic conference in 2007, the Centre has run a series of seminars open to the public, including one on ‘Medical Lives’ in 2007-08 and another on ‘Enlightenment Lives’ in 2008-09. Whilst originally growing out of the English Department the centre now encompasses a range of disciplines including visual arts and medicine, a growing area of interest within life-writing.

The purpose of the “Centre for Life Narratives” at Kingston University, led by Dr Meg Jensen and also established in 2007, which is now based in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, combines qualities of both “virtual” and institution-based centres, aiming “to bring best practice across all genres of life narrative work together in one physical and virtual space” ([www.kingston.ac.uk/research/life-narratives](http://www.kingston.ac.uk/research/life-narratives)). Its website emphasizes the Centre’s theoretical orientation, suggesting that the “craft of constructing a life-narrative remains under-theorised” ([www.kingston.ac.uk/research/life-narratives](http://www.kingston.ac.uk/research/life-narratives)). The Centre has hosted a series of life-writing lectures each academic year since 2008, including lectures by Norma Clarke, Max Saunders, and Robert Fraser. It also ran a major conference in 2007 which led to the publication of *The Spirit of the Age* (2009), edited by Meg Jensen and Jane Jordan. The Centre is keen, however, to work with non-academic groups, including schools and local theatre and is building corporate and community outreach strands in its work.

Finally, the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, based at Wolfson College, Oxford and led by Professor Hermione Lee, launched in November 2011. According to the centre's website, it "hosts an annual series of Life-Writing lectures and an annual Life-Stories Day, involving auto/biographical presentations from many of the college's students and Fellows. There is also a lively Life-Stories Society" ([www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing](http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing)). The Life-Stories Society "encourages its members to explore subjects and methods relevant to their own life-stories and to the biographies of others.... Once a year, the college holds a Life-Stories Day for college members to share stories that represent, or relate to, aspects of their lives" ([www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing](http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing)).

The Oxford Centre offers a definition of life-writing which unusually starts with biography. And this definition offers a version of life-writing which is relevant to the discipline across the British academic sector today:

Life-writing involves, and goes beyond, biography. It encompasses everything from the complete life to the day-in-the-life, from the fictional to the factional. It embraces the lives of objects and institutions as well as the lives of individuals, families and groups.

Life-writing includes autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, journals (written and documentary), anthropological data, oral testimony, and eye-witness accounts. It is not only a literary or historical specialism, but is relevant across the arts and sciences, and can involve philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers and anthropologists. ([www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing](http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing))

This centre also emphasizes the relationship between biography and scientific discovery and between life-writing and "studies relating to the Holocaust, genocide, testimony and

confession, and gender and apartheid” ([www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing](http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing)). Among future projects “the Centre will turn its attentions to the relationship between life-writing and the archive; the role of new media and social networks in twenty-first-century biography; and oral history” ([www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing](http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing)). It will hold a conference on war and life-writing in 2012. In 2013, OCLW will hold its Inaugural Conference, on “The Lives of Objects”: “Everything from scientific instruments, technological artefacts, mementos, mundane and domestic items, and aesthetic creations such as sculpture and portraiture can provide clues to lives lived” ([www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing](http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing)). Here and elsewhere life-writing is seen as an advance on biography, as going “beyond biography” ([www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing](http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/life-writing)).

This very brief overview of leading life-writing centres focuses on the ‘public face’ offered on websites. King’s College, Kingston and Oxford are keen to stress the interdisciplinary nature of their work and biography is now subsumed within life-writing, which encompasses many different forms in addition to written narrative. Kingston highlights an interest in the development of theory and the centre based at Oxford seems to embrace as many aspects of life-writing as possible, including sociological perspectives. These are all exciting developments which offer new ways to study life-writing and they suggest that written biography will now form only one part of academic research on life-writing. This offers an opportunity for biography to find new styles and forms. There is at least one other question which is being addressed in some research centres which may influence the future of written biography: what is the relationship between written narratives and new media; in other words, are web-based forms going to dominate in future and if so how will narrative style and form change as a result? Also, as the remit for the Oxford Centre and the Arts and Social Sciences Faculty at Kingston University suggest, there may well be a further blurring of boundaries between life-writing research in the social sciences and humanities and this



may provide an opportunity for biography to explore new forms which encompass both individual and collective lives. Finally, a forthcoming seven-volume 'History of Life-Writing', focused on written narratives, published by Oxford University Press, will provide a significant opportunity to place the development of biography within the growth of other forms of life-writing and to assess the genre's impact on the field as a whole.

## **Networks**

In addition to research centres, there are a number of relevant networks supported by British universities. The *Auto/Biography Study Group*, run by the British Sociological Association, and supported by the faculties of education at Liverpool and Southampton universities, publishes an annual yearbook and aims "to foster an interest in and bring together those looking analytically and sociologically at all forms of biography and autobiography, the relationship between different genres of representing lives, and the interrelation of biography and autobiography" ([www.britsoc.co.uk/study-groups/autobiography](http://www.britsoc.co.uk/study-groups/autobiography)).

The *AHRC Challenges to Biography Network* established in 2011, and led by Professor Ray Monk at Southampton University, runs events, a website and blog aiming to foster debate about the status of biography. This network is particularly unusual being the only formal network or centre within British universities with a focus on written biography. One of the purposes of the network is to bring academics, biographers, publishers and the book-selling world together:

The last two decades have witnessed a huge expansion of research into the nature of biography. One of the great strengths of this burgeoning research culture is its interdisciplinary nature, with researchers from a wide range of academic disciplines, as

well as freelance biographers and scholars unattached to any academic institution. This very strength, however, presents biography with a series of challenges.... The aim of the 'Challenges to Biography' network is to meet these challenges, providing a platform for discussion that will be interdisciplinary, international, and inclusive. Users of the network may include academics who write biography, theorists who write about biography, freelance biographers, agents, and publishers; or indeed anyone else who simply has an interest in biography. ([www.ahrcbiographynetwork.com](http://www.ahrcbiographynetwork.com))

This network seeks to address or at least debate the tension inherent in the hybrid nature of the genre, a hybridity which has been a focus of this study. The network hoped to continue its work after funding ran out at the end of 2012, and its work will now be encompassed within the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing.

Other life-writing and biography networks have been set up by institutions outside Britain but have been supported by British Universities. In 1999, the “International Auto/Biography Association (IABA)” was formed at the First International Auto/Biography Conference at Peking University: “IABA aims to broaden the world vision of auto/biographers, scholars and readers, to deepen the cross-cultural understanding of self, identity and experience, and to carry on global dialogues on life-writing” ([www.iaba.com](http://www.iaba.com)). IABA organise annual conferences, one of which was held at Sussex University in 2010. The goal of the “European Network of Theory and Practice of Biography”, established in 2009, based in the University of Valencia in Spain and supported by universities in Italy, France and Britain, aims “to create an international and interdisciplinary forum to allow reflection about theoretical and methodological problems regarding biographic writing and research” ([www.uv.es/retpb](http://www.uv.es/retpb)). All these institutions have been formed within the last fifteen years. As the examples I have cited in the preceding discussion suggests, life-writing – and biography

within it - has gained academic attention and respectability. How and why this has happened is suggested in the pages that follow.

## **Journals**

There are three main specialist international journals cited by 'The International Auto/biography Association' on their website which publish academic papers about life-writing, including biography. For over thirty years, *Biography*, published by the University of Hawaii Press, the first such specialist journal, founded in 1978, "has been an important forum for well-considered biographical scholarship. It features stimulating articles that explore the theoretical, generic, historical, and cultural dimensions of life-writing; and the integration of literature, history, the arts, and the social sciences as they relate to biography" ([www.iaba.com](http://www.iaba.com)). *Life-writing* established in 2004 by Curtin University in Australia, is "one of the leading journals in the field of biography and autobiography" ([www.theiaba.org](http://www.theiaba.org)) and "has the unique and unusual policy of carrying both scholarly articles and critically informed personal narrative" ([www.theiaba.org](http://www.theiaba.org)). The journal is "particularly interested in work that aims to incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives and broaden the geographical focus of life-writing" ([www.theiaba.org](http://www.theiaba.org)). *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, published by the University of North Carolina in the United States, is "a journal of scholarship devoted to autobiography, biography, diaries, letters and relations between lifewriting and other discourse" ([www.theiaba.org](http://www.theiaba.org)). It was established in 1985 and accepts manuscripts "dealing with any aspect of lifewriting. Subject matter may be drawn from any period or genre but must show clear connections to the theory and practice of lifewriting" ([www.theiaba.org](http://www.theiaba.org)). Finally, two other journals focus on biography: The *Journal of Historical Biography*, published by the University of the Fraser Valley in the United States, established in 2007, "accepts submissions in English or French embracing any aspect of historical biography, including

biographical portraits of prominent individuals of any nation, and theoretical, methodological, or philosophical pieces that reflect on the larger issues associated with writing biography or autobiography” ([www.ufv.ca](http://www.ufv.ca)); The *Journal of Medical Biography*, published in London by the Royal Society of Medicine Press and established in 1993, “focuses on the lives of people in or associated with medicine, those considered legendary as well as the less well known. The journal includes much original research about figures from history and their afflictions ... providing an insight into the origins of modern medicine and the characters and personalities that made it what it is today” ([www.jmb.rsmjournals.com](http://www.jmb.rsmjournals.com)). These last two journals are narrower and more traditional in their remit and do not have such an interdisciplinary approach. Only one of these five journals is based in Britain. A new journal, the *European Journal of Life-writing*, published by the University of Amsterdam, was launched in the summer 2012 and may provide an important forum for British life-writing.

In addition to these periodicals there are several annuals devoted to the subject of life-writing. The International Auto/biography Association also cites the *Auto/Biography Yearbook*, a publication by the Auto/Biography Study Group based in the British Sociological Association. The *Yearbook* “addresses conceptual and empirical issues relating to biography and autobiography and their social contexts and its objective is to nurture and develop scholarly interest in the representation and understanding of lives” ([www.iaba.org](http://www.iaba.org)). *Lifewriting Annual: Biographical and Autobiographical Studies* has published issues in 2006, 2008 and 2012. It states on its website that it “presents critical and scholarly essays on lifewriting in all its forms—biography, autobiography, memoir, journals, diaries, letters, and works in media other than print.... The annual is a forum for the discussion of all aspects of lifewriting—theoretical, critical, and scholarly” ([www.amspressinc.com/lifewriting](http://www.amspressinc.com/lifewriting)). It contains a section called “Crossings” devoted to “essays that blend biographical and

autobiographical genres and those that combine such writing with other literary genres” ([www.amspressinc.com/lifewriting](http://www.amspressinc.com/lifewriting)).

Finally, in the context of social history, which includes oral history and mass observation projects focusing on the lives of ordinary people, the “Centre for Life History and Life-writing Research” at Sussex University identifies the following journals as relevant to their area of research: *Family and Community History* (the journal of the Family and Community Historical Research Society), *International Journal of Oral History*; *Life stories/Recits de vie*; *Memory and Narrative, Oral History* (the journal of the Oral History Society), *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History*, *Words and Silences*, the Bulletin of the International Oral History Association. Other journals such as *Narrative Inquiry*, cited on the website of the “Center for Biographical Research” at the University of Hawaii, *Essays in Criticism* and the *Hudson Review*, have published papers about the nature of biography. Special editions of journals are also a useful sources of research material about the genre, such as the *South Central Review* 23.3 (2006) and *American Imago* 54.4 (1997).

### **The Place of Biography within Life-Writing**

In a paper published in 2002, but written before he took up his academic position at the University of East Anglia, Richard Holmes considers the potential scope for the academic study of biography, despite criticism of the genre. He argues that the “notion of a popular, even a subversive discipline, which celebrates and studies a common human nature ... would seem to me crucial.... It suggests a profound humanist ambition” (“The Proper Study” 10); any academic course must “surely concern itself primarily with the outstanding biographers, as literary artists, and their place in the changing nature of the form” (12). The approach he suggested was conservative, based on a study of the canon in the form; a canon

which he then goes on to outline. This study of the canon should be placed within its historical context and he argues that it is in “shifts and differences – factual, formal, stylistic, ideological, aesthetic – between early and later biographies that students could find such an endless source of interest and historical information. They would discover how reputations developed, how fashions changed, how social and moral attitudes moved, how standards of judgement altered” (15). The approach would include new experimental forms, including those based on fictional biographies or novels about biography. Holmes proposes a new discipline called comparative biography based on the idea that “every biography is the interpretation of a life, and that many different interpretations are always possible” (16). He also believes that the “subtle question of the nature of non-fiction narrative, and how it differs from fiction, offers one of the most fascinating and fruitful of all possible fields for students” (16) and he sums up a theme which has been discussed throughout this study, that in biography, “We make sense of life by establishing ‘significant’ facts, and by telling ‘revealing’ stories about them” (17). He wonders whether the study of biography “might teach us simply how to understand other people better. And hence, through the ‘other’ ourselves” (17). Finally, he suggests that “the close written study of biography could throw much more light on the unsuspected role of rhetorical devices such as ‘suspense’, ‘premonition’, ‘anecdote’, and ‘ventriloquism’ in the apparently transparent form of life-writing” (17). In other words, the canon Holmes outlines takes in the concerns expressed by critics of the genre, particularly those influenced by poststructuralist theory. In a paper published later, in 2008, Holmes continues to stress the potential for academic courses to promote the practice of new and aspiring biographers. He maintains his view that to “learn about biography, you must view it comparatively (“The Past Has a Great Future” 28). Holmes then moves on to reflect “on the kind of biographical issues that are being debated in universities and at conferences around the world” (29), listing the following:

- the significance of the cult of celebrity, and the generation of pseudo-biographical forms, notably on the Internet (e.g. Facebook)
- the creative impact of biography on other media: film, television, photography, portraiture, and even ballet (e.g. the recent ‘biographical ballet’ about George Gershwin, produced in Paris in 2008)
- the revival of biography within narrative history
- the use of biography as a bridge to fields of specialist knowledge, such as philosophy or the physical sciences
- the development of biographical exhibitions, using physical objects (so-called ‘object biography’), photographs, video loops and sound archives
- ethical questions such as the biographer’s invasion of privacy
- the big philosophical or epistemological questions about the nature of human understanding, empathy and subjectivity (e.g. how far can we ever know another human being?). (29)

In Holmes’s view “the study of biography at university can become a complete new humanist discipline” (29), which can embrace new forms including blogs, “CD sleeves, author statements, profiles and interviews, the self-correcting Wikipedia entries on the Internet” (29). However, Holmes maintains his view that “the primary aim of teaching biography remains the written form: to recover a great tradition, establish the study of comparative biography, and lure students from Theory and back to the actual practice of research and writing.... Above all, though, it aims to teach the art and craft of biographical narrative – storytelling” (29).

In the context of developments within life-writing in British universities Holmes's perspective is at once in and out of tune with academic fashion. He recognises new forms and subjects within an interdisciplinary context, but at the same time he remains an advocate for canonical written biography which he believes should be used as the basis for teaching biography. This is often the approach taken within creative writing courses, and Holmes's main interest is in the practice of biography, but his is unlikely to be a popular approach within research centres, which have wider definitions of the subject and form of life-writing, and often focus on life-writing texts which are not part of any traditional canon. There remains a tension between Holmes's focus on 'great' lives and interest in the lives of ordinary or marginalized people, those seen as excluded in biography by postcolonial and feminist theorists.

Meg Jensen, Director of the Centre for Life Narratives at Kingston University, is less conservative, more fully aligned with current trends. In 2009 she published a paper on a survey of life-writers which explores in part the relevance of theory to their experience as writers. She found that "all respondents were clearly concerned with both the difficulty of constructing "selves" or "voices" and with the implications of the choices—and the failures—they had made in doing so" ("Separated by a Common Language" 307) and that "Despite their claims of ignorance about life-writing theory, the responses of ... writers to questions of representation in their work do, most decidedly, speak to and inform theoretical arguments about subject/object relations in the genre" (307). Respondents understood the constructed nature of their narratives, believing nevertheless that a version of the truth "however partial, biased and edited" (308) is created in his or her work. Jensen is interested in the nature of rhetoric in life-writing and the constructions of the self within it and analysis of her survey shows that "biographers who responded to my questionnaire ... were all engaged with, and concerned by, issues of language and interpretation in their writing (309).



She makes a plea for greater understanding between practitioners and theorists arguing that they have a great deal to offer each other: “It may be useful ... to think of each—theory and practice—as indebted to the other for continuing the public dissemination of and interest in the subject/object debate” (310). In another paper Jensen hopes that the Kingston University research centre is “a place for practice and theory to talk to each other” (“Do You Speak Life Narrative?” xxviii) and she argues that as life-writing grows within universities the split between text-based and non-text-based life stories will disappear, along with “that between theory and practice” (xxvii). Jensen’s work reflects on some of the issues discussed in this study including the role of rhetoric and the narrator’s voice in life-writing narratives, recognition by life-writers about the constructed nature of the self and the interrelationship between theory and life-writing. An overview of life-writing courses and research centres suggests that her plea for greater understanding is evolving rather than securely established, with aspiring life-writers, in particular, including biographers, eager to focus on practice rather than theory.

Professor Elizabeth Podnieks, of the University of Toronto, comments on this tension between non-academic and academic perspectives about life-writing, particularly in the case of biography. The marketplace plays a part here, as do “the two greatest notable changes in biography” (2), both of which arise “from technologies that allow for radical new ways of producing, disseminating, and theorizing the genre and from an expansion of the definition of what constitutes biographical expression so that when we think of biography we mean not only written but also (tele-)visual, graphic, digital, and performed lives, for instance” (2). She suggests that these developments are changing the theorising and practice of biography, creating a “new biography”. She also emphasizes the international character of centres and networks for biographers:

The [Leon] Levy Center [for Biography launched in 2008] hosted its “First Annual Conference on Biography” in March, 2009, and it is only one of the most recent offerings by the numerous associations in the field around the world. In 1991, the MLA instituted the Division of Autobiography, Biography, and Life-writing; the International Auto/Biography Association, founded in 1999, hosts an biennial meeting; and the joint Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association launched its “Biographies” division in 2000. Examples such as these are advertised on the Center for Biographical Research, “Life-writing Resources and Links” page: <http://www.hawaii.edu/biograph/cbrlinks.html>. “Centers, Programs, and Degrees” include ... The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography in Vienna ... and the MA in Biography at Monash University and the Unit for Studies in Biography and Autobiography at La Trobe University, in Australia (8), both established in 1996.

It is interesting that the growth in centres outside Britain was happening in the 1990s. Apart from an M.A. in Biography at Buckingham University, the *Journal of Medical Biography* and the Centre at Sussex University, most British developments in life-writing courses and research centres have happened since 2000.

Professor Kathryn Hughes, of the University of East Anglia, writing in 2010, argues, contra to those seek to break down barriers or dissolve tensions, that it is biography’s “refusal to be completely contained by either the academy or by the market place which gives it its continuing vitality” (“Lives in Institutions” 282). She sees a direct connection between universities and the market-place, arguing that non-academic biographers have sought the endorsement of academics up to the present day: “Eminent biographers are increasingly submitting themselves for the degree of “PhD by publication” while others are being offered honorary doctorates” (284). Hughes provides a useful overview of the growth of the genre

which, incidentally, supports my discussion of its development in earlier chapters. In the late 1920s and 1930s, when Virginia Woolf and Harold Nicolson were writing about biography, “biography gained its first modern theorists [and] also began to acquire its reputation as being unfit for academic purpose. While the genre may have been flourishing in the market place—Hesketh Pearson delightedly dubbed the 1930s “the day of the biographer” (qtd. in Marcus 193–94)—as far as the Academy was concerned biography was increasingly *persona non grata*” (286). Then Hughes highlights the important role of feminist biography and persistent concerns about the validity of the genre, the concerns discussed in earlier chapters of this study. Paradoxically, she argues that those concerns helped to gain the genre academic respectability:

From the late 1960s American critics, including Elaine Showalter and Ellen Moers, instituted a new, alternative canon of literature in which forgotten women rather than great men predominated.... Gay and black subjects were likewise reinstated as the new wave of “identity politics” looked for texts that could be used to foster consciousness. MA courses in gender studies and women’s history ... flourished. (284)

Biography was enlisted in what was seen as a crucial academic and theoretical enterprise. Though stressing that “doubts about its status within the academy faded away entirely” (284), Hughes is more positive about the status of biography within universities in the late twentieth century:

A new interest in the material objects authors left behind— letters, diaries, manuscripts—meant that universities became quick and hungry to provide homes for literary archives.... Scholars within British universities also found ways of writing literary biography that negotiated the challenge of critical theory and insisted upon the

continuing significance of the lived life as a way of understanding literary works. Richard Ellmann on James Joyce (1977), David Nokes on Jonathan Swift (1985), Lyndall Gordon on Virginia Woolf (1984), and Park Honan on Jane Austen (1987) all bear witness to the way in which leading British academics continued to publish literary biography in a decade when the author was supposed not simply to be dead but to be pinned to the ground with a big, sharp stake through his heart. (288)

Hughes also points out that “Academics, meanwhile, have continued not only to write biography but to interrogate the form as they do so” (289) and that “cradle-to-grave narratives continue to get written” (289). In other words, written biography remains significant. She argues that the relation between biography and the academy “has been a constant dance of shifting positions, so that at one moment biography appears to be mounting a radical challenge to writing that comes from inside the academy, and at others it seems to be content to operate along an entirely parallel path. The result has been a continuing tension between the academy and the genre that has in fact ensured its continuing liveliness” (290). The tension is a good thing. While stressing the benefits of the tension between biography and the academy, Hughes encourages the teaching of biographical practice within universities and argues that doing so does not imply that the rigours of theory or research are abandoned; in her teaching at the University of East Anglia she has found that “students stay continuously alert and reflexive about the process upon which they are embarked.... The very act of facing up to the kinds of charges that the academy has at times made against biography concentrates students’ minds on exactly what they are doing and not doing” (291). At the same time she notes that the academy’s relationship with autobiography “has been far smoother.... Organizationally and epistemologically, first-person texts slot neatly into a whole series of pedagogic spaces” (290). Hughes does not go on to explain what she means by this but it certainly remains the case that first person narratives have been the focus of academic interest

in recent years. One reason for this may be that autobiography, letters and diaries and other forms of first person narratives are seen as offering greater authenticity; questions of fact can be left in the hands of the first person narrator and writer in autobiography, whilst the use of evidence and the balance between form and content in biographies are open to question. As Craig Howes has argued, only an autobiographical narrator “can describe what living [a] life felt like, or record what certain experiences meant to the person who had them” (*Afterword* 249). Also, theories about autobiography have embraced the concerns of New Historicism and Feminism in a more direct way than biography; Laura Marcus argues that in autobiography the “repeated use of the concept of ‘self-fashioning’ implies a conscious, although culturally determined, construction of identity in literature and broader cultural spheres” (222) and as a result autobiography offers an opportunity for the expression of marginalized and postcolonial voices. Whilst I have argued that recent biography has to some extent responded to these concerns, it could be argued that it remains, despite the growth of group biographies, a genre which has not responded adequately to the need for lives of more marginalized figures.

Ray Monk has recently commented on the place of biography within universities. One of the main arguments in Monk’s lecture at a symposium organized by the “Challenges to Biography Network” in 2011 is that courses which study biography at British universities support the practice of biography: “if you are going to theorise about biography that is best done alongside the practice of biography as an art” ([www.ahrcbiographynetwork.com](http://www.ahrcbiographynetwork.com)). He opposes the current distinction in many universities between the segregation of practice (in Creative Writing courses) and research (in life-writing research centres): “why have we not integrated research centres with places where students learn how to write biography?” ([www.ahrcbiographynetwork.com](http://www.ahrcbiographynetwork.com)); he gives examples of universities in the United States, the Netherlands and Austria where this approach is encouraged. And he compares the tiny

audience for academic writing with the wide readership gained by non-academic biographies. Monk's other main theme is that universities should be supporting the practice of biography financially, in particular biography for a general non-academic readership, particularly as advances from non-academic publishers are in very short supply, and small when they are offered.

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In Chapter Six I suggested that reviews of biographies targeted at a general readership often receive stern criticism from academics and that one of the reasons for this is that non-academic biographers are not considered by academics to be specialists in their field. On the one hand, academics expect non-academic peers to meet their own standards, not accepting other standards; on the other hand, today many academic biographers share with Monk an aspiration to be successful commercially, like their non-academic peers. What seems to be missing, or may be evolving as courses and centres develop, is a clear definition of the role of universities in this field; is it appropriate for universities to support biographies which are aimed at the wider market, or is it their role instead to break the new ground being mapped out in the research centres discussed in this chapter, which includes promoting the narratives of marginalized and postcolonial voices through biography, as well as first person narratives? Monk argues that universities should develop closer connections between courses for biographers and centres for the study of life-writing. As evidence in this chapter suggests, he is right to say that at present most courses, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, and most research centres, have different functions. However, while universities may have a role in training aspiring professional writers of nonfiction, it may not be their role to fund the resulting publications; and if it is the role of research centres to support new subjects and forms of written biography, to challenge the very definition of biography and take the form into new areas of knowledge, then this process may not result in books which are likely to be

commercially successful. To some extent what lies at the root of these academics' arguments is a belief that there is a potential convergence between non-academic and academic biography.

An article by Edmund Champion, an American writer, reviewer and blogger, published five years ago seems to me to encapsulate this debate. Champion starts by arguing that "current developments suggest a convergence between the academic biography and its commercial counterpart" (B12). He traces how both "academic and commercial biographies evolved, sometimes dabbling with and adopting elements of the other. Academic biographies became influenced by emerging social concerns. Commercial biographies applied greater sophistication" (B12). Champion suggests that three aspects of commercial literary biography would bring it closer to the expectations of academics: that it consider the relationship between life and work more closely, and "for the most part stick[s] to details that are germane to the writer's life and work" (B12); that all evidence is provided to support any speculative analysis; and that all sources are cited accurately. But herein lies the rub: if non-academic biographers write about the works of their subjects they are criticised for doing so by their academic peers or critics because they are not considered to be experts in the relevant field and because their work does not reach academic standards for research and the use of evidence. The non-academic biographer can't win. In a review of Adam Sisman's *Hugh Trevor-Roper: the biography* (2010), Doug Munro's criticism echoes the concerns of his academic peers discussed in the last chapter; he suggests that in this biography "the balance is wrong: the stress is on 'the life' because Sisman is not in a position to properly appraise 'the works'.... Sisman veers away from intellectual history because he lacks the necessary grounding, and thus he plays to his strengths as a more conventional biographer" (66). Munro goes on and identifies Sisman's biography as a form of personal biography-a form I described in the last chapter:

Adam Sisman's biography of Trevor-Roper is less satisfactory as intellectual history than as an explication of a life. What Sisman does particularly well is to elucidate personal relationships and to put biographic flesh on the people who came in and out of Trevor-Roper's life. He also imparts a sense of place and of wider context, and does all this in accomplished prose. It is, indeed, an exceptionally well-written book.

(74)

I have argued in this study that some commercial, non-academic biographies do consider the connections between the life of a biographical subject and his or her work, exploring at times what may have been on the mind of the subject, the influence of his or her private life on their professional life, and commenting on the wider social and political context in which he or she lived, and that in doing so biographies are responding in part to the concerns of its academic critics. Though, in the case of literary biography, they tend not to engage in literary criticism, if they do, they leave themselves open to academic criticism.

Questions of funding or the marketplace – the sort Monk voices – are symptoms rather than the causes of tension. I would suggest that the underlying and continuing tensions that constrain the lives of biographers in British universities are those outlined in the previous chapter: between academic biography written by scholars who are experts in their field and write within the constraints of academic rigour, and what I have called personal biography. In non-academic biography the life is understood to form a context in which the works of a biographical subject can be understood, whilst in academic biography the work of a subject remains the main focus. This is not to say that academics like Hermione Lee and Richard Holmes cannot write popular, non-academic, personal biography, but that they should not be surprised when their academic peers criticise them when they do, or are unable or unwilling to support them financially when they plan to do so. To some extent this may also have deterred academics from writing personal biographies of less-well-known, marginalized and



postcolonial writers and other subjects because financial support will not be available from the marketplace to enable them to do so. As I discussed in the last chapter, Hermione Lee has been subject to less criticism by academic reviewers, mainly because she is acknowledged as a biographer who maintains academic rigour and is an acknowledged expert in her field, nevertheless she is criticised by some reviewers when she breaches or challenges aspects of academic scholarship and conventions in her biographical writing. So, any academic or non-academic biographer of personal biography can be caught between, on the one hand, the rigors of traditional academic standards, and on the other, the expectations about new forms and subjects within academic life-writing which are evolving in teaching and research across many universities.

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Biography has today been subsumed within life-writing and is now studied alongside first person narratives and many other forms of life-writing. By grouping it within wider forms of narrative students are allowed to see biography as just one form of narrative, one sort of view. This may endanger biography in one sense by refusing to give it an individual status but it also encourages the study and development of much wider and new biographical forms. Life-writing as a category or discipline both protects and endangers traditional written biography, and offers an opportunity for new subjects and forms to evolve.

Finally, can the study of life-writing narratives, including biography, offer an opportunity, as the “Centre for Life Narratives” at Kingston University suggests, to explore further the relationship between theory and creative writing, either fiction or nonfiction? Biographer and academic Jonathan Bate argues, in the context of the relationship between English Literature and Creative Writing in the academy, that there “is no inherent reason why there should be such a division between criticism and creativity in English studies”

(*Foreword* xv). He seeks what he calls a healthy dialogue “in which critics are interested in writerly skills – rhetoric, narrative construction, pacing – and students of creative writing are unafraid of critical judgment” (xvi). Similarly, life-writing, including biography, crossing many interdisciplinary boundaries, can promote such a dialogue, between readers, critics, and writers, of fiction and nonfiction, within and outside the academy.

## Conclusion

The main finding of my research is that the writing of Claire Tomalin, Richard Holmes and Hermione Lee has been informed by recent academic debates and can be shown to respond to objections to the genre which have arisen out of such debates. As a result of this finding I have come to six conclusions which I discuss in this thesis.

First, that the biographical writing of Tomalin, Holmes and Lee echoes the approach of late twentieth century historiography<sup>26</sup> and, like their contemporary Holroyd, they make connections between the past and the present, rethinking the life of a biographical subject in the context of their own time, as well as the public, professional and private, inner lives of their subjects during the periods in which they lived<sup>27</sup>. Secondly, I would argue that these biographers are often aware that truth is relative and that the lives of their subjects are composite and fragmented; they also subvert the use of realist forms in their biographical writing; and to varying degrees, as writers of nonfiction, they are interested in the balance between the form and style of their narrative and the facts of the lives they are unraveling. However, the perspective of different biographers of course differs; Holmes and Lee

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<sup>26</sup> This study argues that one way to approach the debate about biographical narrative is to explore its relationship to historiography. R.G. Collingwood, a mid twentieth century historian, introduced a sea change into historical studies. He believed that a historian should have empathy and that historians as storytellers achieved such empathy through, what he called, the 'historical imagination', rethinking the past in the context of the present. In the 2000s historian Alan Munslow, in a discussion about Collingwood's work, argues that "what Collingwood is actually doing, I think, is suggesting that historians should try to get inside the heads of people in the past to contemplate what they probably thought, and discover which thoughts prompted their actions (I as much as they can be judged by the available evidence)" (*Routledge Companion* 62). To ensure that historical imagination is grounded in historical research Munslow suggests that it has three rules: "the imagined past must be localised in space and time; it must be consistent with itself; and it must be bounded by the evidence" (63). Munslow's view is that "most historians would probably accept that because the past is organised through the exercise of their historical imagination this means neglecting any absolutist notion of historical truth. Historical interpretations may be better regarded as likely to be true, corresponding to the verified evidence and the coherence of the statement as judged by other historians, and the demands of their own culture" (236) in other words coherence has to be based on a consensus. For Munslow "historical descriptions are true if they are well supported by the evidence" (237). But how are facts defined? Munslow clarifies that we need a coherence/consensus theory of truth: "the accord that exists among well informed and skilled historians.... a descriptive historical statement may be regarded as very likely to be true if it coheres with other descriptive statements about the past world and a descriptive consensus is reached. It is probably false if it does not" (237). But if one takes the view that as nonfiction biography is part of history then I would suggest that the idea of a biographical imagination is linked to this notion of historical imagination and as such a consensus has been very difficult to achieve in debates about biography.

<sup>27</sup> Other biographers have embraced this agenda. Victoria Glendinning's perspective that biography's subjects "all look different for each generation, who see them in a different context" ('Lies and Silences' 60) is common. For example, William St Clair argues that "new generations are interested in new questions ... Regular updating and reappraisals are ... a necessary part of each generation's attempts to reach its own understanding of the past" (221). And Arnold Rampersad, biographer of Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes, suggests we read "biography as we read all history, not so much as an absolutely reliable window on the past as a possible illumination of the present and thus a possible guide to the future" (18).

understand the particular balance between fact and fiction and the nature of ontological and archaeological knowledge differently, which reflects their approaches to biography and this in turn has influenced how critics have responded to their work.

In a chapter on the work of Holmes I argue that the way that he makes connections between the past and present, the public and private lives of his subjects and the connections between their life and work is underpinned, or some might argue undermined, by an aspect of late twentieth century historiography which suggests that fact and fiction cannot be distinguished. My conclusion is that Holmes's work is not only guided by a vision of Romanticism but that one could argue that to some extent his writing reflects the ideas of Hayden White, Ira Nadel and Leon Edel prevalent in the late 1970s and 1980s. As a Romantic biographer Holmes's work shows traces of debates about the demand for more creative, inventive ways of writing biography which enable the biographer to bring their subjects to life. But this search for the actual experience of the being-in-the-world of another human being, encouraged by the idea that a nonfiction writer can be inventive, has opened Holmes up to criticism and reflects a wider objection to biography: that biographers write fiction.

My fourth conclusion is that Tomalin, Lee and Holmes reject the strictures of the New Critics and the 'death of the author' debate, although there are very important differences in their approach. I would argue that literary biographers are interested in the nature of authorship and they draw on a writer's works to understand his or her life. In the case of literary biography the story is often not only the story of a life, but both a story about the life narrative and literary narrative within any one subject's life. In other words, the life of an author is understood to be as much about his and her experience of writing as it is about their day to day life as a child, friend, lover, husband or wife and professional writer negotiating with publishers, promoting, or not in many cases, their work. The experience of writing and

living day to day are part of a literary biographer's understanding of authorship and an understanding of authorship becomes a journey by the biographer to understand how life events can be transformed in an author's writing.

A literary biographer can to some extent avoid the most obvious accusations of the biographical fallacy if they do not seek to undertake literary criticism or judge a literary text based on an account of very specific details of a biographical subject's life. Tomalin falls into this trap, and is criticized for doing so in her biography of Thomas Hardy. In writing about his poems of 1917 she argues that they are a direct representation of his early life with his wife Emma:

At the centre of the story of his past was always Emma in her many different incarnations. Some thirty-six poems allude to her, and they run from minutely specific incidents of their wooing in Cornwall to his sad imaginings at Max Gate, where he persistently sees her in the garden as he walks there ... There are tender evocations of their life together at Sturminster Newton ... There is the sour memory of a Bournemouth hotel and a quarrel, a grim one of Tooting, and sorrowful ones of her singing at the piano. (322)

In *Early Visions* Holmes discusses Coleridge's two versions of his *Dejection Ode* which is influenced by his unrequited love for Sara Hutchinson:

The first version is a passionate declaration of love and renunciation, of almost hysterical intensity; the final (published) version is a cool, beautifully shaped, philosophical ode on the loss of hope and creative power ... the first version ... is unashamedly confessional mentioning Sara, William, Dorothy and Mary by name.... Autobiography ... gives the real authority to the vision of the poem; and to censor and deny it was for Coleridge an act of terrible self-discipline and self-deprivation.... Yet

it is still arguable that “Dejection”, in its reduced and disciplined form, is the more universal work. (320)

Holmes here is keen to highlight the direct autobiographical source for the first version of the poem.

Lee does not fall into the same trap because whilst focusing on aspects of authorship in her subjects’ lives she illustrates how they transformed life into writing in a wider social, cultural and political context. For example, in her biography of Virginia Woolf:

The essays and fiction of the 1930s present a disfigured society with a hypocritical culture and an unbridgeable class gap. They diagnose rigidly constructed gender identities which exclude or oppress the misfits of either sex. They attack tyrannies, war-mongering and the victimisation of those who will not conform. They satirise patriotism, imperialism, Christianity and nationalism. That reading of her social landscape had its roots in her childhood, but it took its force from her experience of the first world war” (343).

Lee suggests that

*Jacob’s Room* is as full of Thoby Stephen as *The Voyage Out* is of Virginia’s painful adolescence, and *Night And Day* of her sister’s character, her family past, and her decision to marry.... Any display of naked autobiography is carefully suppressed.... Jacob’s fictional biography aroused and composed her feelings about Thoby and her memories of Greece, pre-war London, Cambridge, and the early days of Bloomsbury: so it was itself a kind of memoir. (436)

And in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) in the case of the character, the war veteran Septimus Warren Smith

Her clinical diagnosis of his condition – a political reading ahead of Foucault ... takes revenge on all the diagnoses that his [the psychiatrist’s] type has made of her.... her

writing transforms illness into a language of power and inspiration ... But to treat her fiction only as therapy is to empty her writing of all the content except the curative, to depoliticise it and to narrow its ambitions. Madness is not her only subject. Nor does she write simply to make herself feel better. (194)

Tomalin and Holmes are both interested in questions of authorship in their subjects' lives but when they make direct links between a specific incident in a life and a text written by a biographical subject they open themselves up to criticism. My point here is not to suggest that they are wrong in doing so, but rather to highlight a distinction between examples of the biographical fallacy in literary biography and what I see as a wider and more important study of authorship in their work. On a personal note I would argue that incidences of the biographical fallacy provoke systematic over-reaction within academic circles and this has to some extent overshadowed critics' approach to wider questions of authorship central to the study of literary subjects in biography and all forms of life-writing.

My fifth conclusion discussed in a chapter on the work of Hermione Lee argues that she has found a way through the difficult terrain of challenges to the genre. Her work reflects New Historicism, and I would suggest, a pursuit of what Michel Foucault called archaeological knowledge rooted in an historical understanding of subjectivity<sup>28</sup>. Foucault believes that "All knowledge is rooted in a life, a society, a language that have a history" (372) and he does not

wish to deny the validity of intellectual biographies, or the possibility of a history of theories, concepts, or themes. It is simply that I wonder whether such descriptions are themselves enough ... whether there do not exist, outside their customary boundaries,

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault wants to "reveal a positive unconscious of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse ... unknown to themselves, the naturalists, economists, and grammarians employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories. It is the rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called ... archaeological" (*The Order of Things* xi).

systems of regularities that have a decisive role in the history of the sciences.... If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that ... which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which in short leads to a transcendental consciousness. (xiv)

I understand Foucault's work to mean that it is not inappropriate to suggest that a study of any one life has value, but in doing so we should accept that any such life is influenced, more than any single biographer can be aware by the wider discourses of the society, culture and political context in which both the biographer and biographical subject lived; by an understanding that the study of one life can, and perhaps should inform, our wider understanding of this wider context; and that the study of such a life should be understood as part of history. Each biographer needs to accept that his or her perspective is part of a wider discourse, a positive unconscious, that they may not be able to grasp but which they can contribute to as part of literature and history. This in turn explains why different versions of a life are always needed. Biography can make connections between both the past and the present and the individual lives of biographical subjects as part of a wider history; biographical subjects can be understood as people who can ensoul their age.

Finally, I would also argue that an analysis of Lee's biographical writing encourages a view which suggests that a biographer is both reader and writer. It is not that we have to privilege the reader over the author but that we can encompass both within biographical narrative. Also in biography we hear the voices of the ghosts of both subject and biographer, of authorial voices in conversation within the text and that through this process of writing and reading the biography creates a counter signature. It creates something other than the life of the biographical subject; it creates a narrative constructed by the biographer; not a repeating



of the life but a rereading and rewriting, in which the biographer as reader and writer constructs his or her version of the biographical subject.

In a paper about life-writing as a whole Meg Jensen comments that a survey of life-writers, including biographers, illustrated “a belief repeated by many of the writers surveyed: that ... a pieced-together, crafted text can still communicate some kind of “intrinsic characteristic”, some truth-the subject’s essence. Thus, the questionnaire responses illustrate that life writing (unsurprisingly) is seen by practitioners as offering a form of truth-however partial, biased and edited-and such a view is surely of interest to theorists” (‘Separated by a Common Language’ 308). It is a perspective which suggests that storytelling forms part of a search for authenticity, however relative and fragmented; that a life-writers approach to narrative has a huge influence on the story being told; and that within auto/biography we encounter the ghostly presence of both narrator and subject that I explore further in this thesis.

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